‘Not a bit like “Rain” or “The Letter”’:[1] British women in Malaya and Burma between the wars and the pejorative portraits in the works of W. Somerset Maugham and George Orwell.

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[1] Falconer, J. 1992: 53

CONTENTS

Abstract

My thesis explores and analyses the lived experiences of British women in the colonies of Malaya and Burma during the interwar years (1918 to 1942). Although much has been written about British women in India both before and during the Raj, those who lived, worked, and set up homes in the Southeast Asian colonies have been neglected by historians. In contrast to the lack of historical research, these women are represented in contemporary male-authored fiction, particularly by Somerset Maugham and George Orwell, where they are inevitably presented in a negative light. My intention in the thesis is to juxtapose archive and anecdotal evidence taken from women's diaries, memoirs, personal letters, and contemporary newspaper articles and through these, to interrogate the lived experience of these women to support my hypothesis that they were strong, interesting, and committed individuals, to whom, by not questioning the derogatory stereotype created by male authors, history has done a disservice.

From my research, these women emerged as multi-dimensional figures who actively negotiated divergent paths within the male dominated colonial authority, the unequal power structure of the colonised and the coloniser, and the roles they were expected to maintain within that continuum. It shows them to have been resourceful, thoughtful, and strong, with the ability to use their somewhat ambiguous 'soft power' in ways that frequently benefitted the subject populations while still appearing to preserve the roles the society expected of them. By giving these women their own voice, I demonstrate that they are worthy of academic interest in their own right.

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This work is dedicated to my fellow Southeast Asian scholar and dear friend,

David Bostock 1948–2016

Dear David, may your memory always be for a blessing

Chapter 1 – Introduction

Her servants live in terror of her, though she speaks no Burmese. She has an exhaustive knowledge of the Civil List, always gives charming dinner parties and knows how to put the wives of subordinate officials in their places – in short, she fills with complete success the position for which Nature had designed for her from the first, that of a burra (great) memsahib.

George Orwell, *Burmese days* (1935: p 272)

No-one had expressed a more violent disapprobation of Hammond's behaviour than Mrs Joyce: she was a woman loyal to her friends and she had insisted on the Crosbie's (sic) *staying with her after the trial, for she in common with everyone else had no doubt of the result, till they could make arrangements to go away. It was out of the question for poor, dear Leslie to return to the bungalow at which the horrible catastrophe had taken place. The trial was over by half past twelve and when they reached the Joyces' house a grand luncheon was waiting for them. Cocktails were ready, Mrs Joyce's million-dollar cocktail was celebrated throughout the Malay States, and Mrs Joyce drank Leslie's health. She was a talkative, vivacious woman and now she was in the highest spirits. It was fortunate, for the rest of them were silent. She did not wonder; her husband never had much to say and the other two were naturally exhausted from the long strain to which they had been subjected. During luncheon she carried on a bright and spirited monologue.*

W. Somerset Maugham, 'The letter' (1922: p 226)

… And now she came out with what she had been working up to. She was desperate. 'It's the physical thing. I can't help it, it's stronger than I am. I think of those thin black arms of hers round you and it fills me with physical nausea. I think of you holding those little black babies in your arms. Oh, it's loathsome. The touch of you is odious to me. Each night when I've kissed you, I've had to brace myself up to it. I've had to clench my hands and force myself to touch your cheek.'

Somerset Maugham, 'The force of circumstance' (1922 : p.146)

It's a well-known saying that women lost us the Empire. It's true.[2]

David Lean (1985).

[2] Strobel 1991:1.

Context

During the late 1960s and early 1970s, I spent many months living in Singapore and peninsula Malaysia. During this time, I made friends across a wide variety of communities but a group that made a great impression on me was one made up of, by then, elderly British women, many of whom had been part of the pre-war society of colonial Malaya. For various reasons, they had returned post-war and remained through Independence, so that most of them had spent far more of their lives in Southeast Asia than they had in Britain. Highly individual characters, they were without exception astute and broadminded, compassionate, and gregarious. Fluent in Malay and sometimes more than one Chinese language, their social networks stretched across the multi-cultural societies of Singapore and Malaysia, and they were steeped in the political, social and natural history of the area. Several had undergone the deprivation of the Japanese prisoner-of-war camps during the Second World War and had watched friends, relatives and children die around them, while others, who had managed to reach the comparative safety of Australia, South Africa or the UK, had waited years to hear if husbands, fiancés and friends had survived. Yet here they were, resilient, stimulating raconteurs, happy to share their experiences in these countries with which they felt so much affinity.

However, in contemporary male-authored fiction set in what was then Malaya and Burma of the 1920s and 1930s and most specifically that of George Orwell and Somerset Maugham, women like them were invariably portrayed as immoral, shallow and either careless of the social norms they were expected to maintain or unable to overcome their apparent pettiness. This is clearly demonstrated both in the quotations from Orwell's *Burmese Days* and from the two Maugham short stories ('The Letter'; 'Force of Circumstance') which introduce this chapter. In his description of the final

iteration of Elizabeth Lackersteen, Orwell (1936) makes clear his contempt for the women he classifies as the great memsahibs. Maugham (1985a, 1985b) accentuates the shallow nature of Mrs Joyce in 'The Letter', whose greatest attribute seems to be that she makes good cocktails, and the visceral racism of Doris, the young wife in 'Force of Circumstance'. This trope has fed a particularly negative stereotype. It was certainly the case that in British society (both metropolitan and colonial) in the first half of the twentieth century, women occupied a subordinate position, subservient within the patriarchal structure, and, as will be shown later in the work, were viewed as scapegoats as the grand imperial plan started to falter and disintegrate. This view, as illustrated by filmmaker David Lean's remark quoted earlier, influenced perceptions and lasted well into the latter half of the century.

My intention in researching and developing this thesis is to present a comprehensive account of a representative sample of these women and their lived experiences and to give them a voice. By examining the relevant fiction, especially the case of Ethel Proudlock, the young European women accused of murder in Kuala Lumpur in 1912, on whose story Maugham based 'The Letter' and setting it against the lived reality, I will show how the negative stereotype this fiction created was influenced and supported by a deprecatory male view of these women who thus became the unwarranted victims of a contemporary chauvinistic 'blame culture'.

At the domestic level, I analysed records left by both single, independent women and the wives of colonial servants and planters, paying particular attention to professional women working in medicine. I used primary sources in the shape of correspondence and unpublished memoirs usually written for family consumption, and discovered in the archives of the Indian Office at the British Library, the Colonial Office

files at the National Archives (Kew), the archive of Dr Cicely Williams at the Wellcome Collection, the archives of the Colonial Nursing Service at the Bodleian Library, and in the private papers of Mrs Joan White, kindly made available for me by her family. I show how, rather than contributing to the hastening of the end of Empire as both the fiction and the contemporary masculine bias would seem to suggest, the lives of many of these women indicate that, by negotiating the rigidly stratified boundaries of the colonial societies in which they lived, they were able to generally improve the lives of all and thus, they were a positive influence both domestically and professionally within the colonial framework. However, this influence was disregarded and/or resented by the dominant masculine authority of the colonial societies.

Although there is a considerable body of work - academic, fictional, and anecdotal - written about the memsahibs of British India, there is an academic lacuna where British women who were part of the colonial society of Malaya and Burma in the 1920s and 1930s are concerned. The societies in general have certainly been analysed and examined, but again the British women who were part of them have tended to be either ignored or side-lined as scholars concentrated on the juxtaposition of the colonialists and the colonised in the various spectra of inequality extant within colonial hegemony. If the place of British women has been discussed at all within these analyses, they have invariably appeared in an examination of a dyadic construct of power demonstrating the ability of the coloniser to deny agency to the colonised woman. I do not question the value and importance of academic work that examines the unequal power structure and injustices of the colonial society through the lens of coloniser vs colonised, but rather take a microcosmic approach to explore the position of the British woman within the hierarchically structured gender-based continuum of

power that typified the society of the colonisers themselves and underpinned the values and ethos of the British Empire.

Research questions

The investigations were underpinned by the following research questions.

1. Were the gender inequalities that existed not only between the coloniser and the colonised but within the colonial society itself, essential to the structure of colonial racism and the maintenance of Imperial authority?
2. Can 'Otherness' be viewed not only as a force which underpins the concept of European supremacy, but also allow an analysis of the European community itself, making it possible to view European women within that community as 'Other' within the spectrum of masculine domination?
3. A.L. Stoler (1989: 639) has described the situation as one of '[r]acist but moral women, innocent but immoral men'. Can this double paradox be justified in the case of Malaya and Burma between the wars?
4. How did European women in the colonies in question experience the cleavages of racial dominance and internal social distinctions differently from men because of the former's ambiguous positions, both as subordinates in colonial hierarchies and as active agents of imperial culture?
5. With reference to M. Strobel (1991) that, rather than being passive victims of the colonial patriarchy colonial women's overt support was crucial to the maintenance of that patriarchy, to what extent was the imperial ethos dependent on them or/and were they used as an instrument of oppression?

6. R. Roque and K.A. Wagner (2011: 21) have argued that: ‘The prefix “colonial” has gained a pejorative meaning – a meaning that this book seeks to avoid.’ Is the non-pejorative analysis of a microcosm within the colonial situation with which this research is concerned possible and justifiable?

A cross-disciplinary approach

The initial questions that inspired this research sprang from the recognition and interrogation of the negative portrayal of British women in the British colonies of Southeast Asia in the 1920s and 1930s in contemporary male-authored fiction; a stereotype that seemed to contradict my own experiences of the strong, openminded and charismatic British women I knew in Singapore and Kuala Lumpur in the late 1960s who had spent most of their adult lives in Southeast Asia and who would have been the direct contemporaries of the women portrayed with such deprecation in the works of Maugham and Orwell.

However, the exploration of this contradiction, and, more importantly, the development of a thesis that interrogates it, demands an objective scrutiny of these fictionalised accounts set against an equally objective examination of the structure of colonial society and the lived reality of these British women. To achieve this, I took a cross-disciplinary approach to my research. I examined recent relevant literary criticism as well as historical, feminist, anthropological, archival, and multi-disciplinary cultural theory to assess their suitability either individually or in conjunction one with another as lenses though which to refract and clarify these findings in order that the research questions may be fully investigated. The following section elucidates the theoretical threads that I examined.

Literary criticism

Starting from the representation of colonial women in literature, Jenny Sharpe's *Allegories of Empire: the figure of the woman in the colonial text* (1993), provided a key perspective on the project. Sharpe contends that there was a significant change in the imperial patriciate's view of white women and their sexuality following the First Indian War of Independence (previously known as the Indian Mutiny) of 1857 which engendered an hysterical fear of violence and particularly rape of British women by Asian men. She argues that the imagined violated body of the British female becomes a metaphor for a violation of colonialism itself and thus her 'purity' must be defended at all costs. This contention placed British women on a pedestal which has been created out of the fallacy; that the British woman is the epitome of vulnerable female purity, who must constantly be protected from the threat to her from malevolent natives intent on rape by British masculine aggression and superiority. It also conflates British women's sexual purity with imperial control, and it is this aspect of Sharpe's work that is most pertinent to this research. Any slippage from the male-constructed paradigm of chaste behaviour becomes emblematic of the loss of masculine control in the imperial mindset and must therefore be condemned. As Sharpe (1993: 9) opines, 'Power may circulate through all members of society, but there is a difference between those who are relatively empowered and those who are relatively disempowered.'

In the context of this work this statement is useful in its implication that, within the colonial society where the power essentially lies with the men, it is used to create a construct where women are overtly valued, but in fact placed in a false situation of vulnerablility in which their own power is limited by male dominance (ibid.). Whereas Sharpe is mainly concerned with the effects of this dynamic within and between

both the colonised and the colonisers, this research will examine the gendered power play within the society of the colonisers and examples investigated.

Feminism and feminist theory

In *European Women and the second British Empire,* Margaret Strobel (1991) provides a convincing analysis of the contradictory and often challenging space occupied by European women in the project of empire. In doing so she illuminates the intricate interweaving of ideologies of gender and race in constructing colonial and indigenous masculinities and femininities. Specifically, her identification of the trope of the 'myth of the destructive female, (Strobel 1991: 1-15), a masculine, high colonial delusion, which posits a time in the past when colonial society was one of an idyllic racial mix which soured on the arrival of the white women, is germane to this research. Her assertion that the British women of the empire carved out a space for themselves within the options made available to them by British expansion, but within it, they were treated as inferiors and her claim that they were seen as 'the inferior sex within the superior race' (Strobel 1991:xi) has provided a useful point of analysis.

Strobel also states that theories of colonialism have stressed the masculine nature of dominance to the extent that Western women have been excluded or marginalised from colonial studies. If they have been mentioned at all it has been to stress their apparently racist attitudes and their luxurious lifestyles compared with that of their 'sisters' at home and the indigenous women who worked as their servants. By examining their place in colonial society, Strobel explains British colonial women as both victims and agents, thus rejecting the notion of empire as an exclusively masculine space. She claims that, rather than being passive victims of the patriarchy,

their presence became crucial to the endurance of that patriarchy, thus posing the question of the extent to which the imperial ethos was dependent on them and covertly relied on their presence to establish the rigid and racially defined social hierarchy, the maintenance of which justified draconianly enforced levels of segregation. Thus, in Strobel's view, colonialism used these women as an instrument of oppression. Although not necessarily agreeing with her conclusion, I have found Strobel's theory of the ambiguity of the British women's positions within the colonial society a useful tool.

My research is congruent with Strobel (1991: 1) in her claim that 'the myth of the destructive female' embodies a stereotype of the petty, frivolous, ethnocentric, and unproductive world of dependant women who contributed nothing of benefit to either the Imperial enterprise or to colonised groups. 'This characterisation can be challenged from two perspectives: its inaccuracy and its lack of understanding of gender roles in colonial society' (Strobel 1991: 7).

By using archival evidence of women working independently within the imperial regimes both officially in the fields of medicine, and domestically in the running of large households and estates, this thesis underscores Strobel's claim that the 'myth of the destructive female' is indeed chimerical and will supply further insights into the workings of race and class ideologies within colonial society.

Anthropology

The anthropologist Ann Laura Stoler has worked on issues of colonial governance, racial epistemologies, and the sexual politics of empire, thus making her scholarship particularly pertinent to this endeavour. Stoler (1989) argues that concepts of intimacy, power, race, womanhood, belonging and not belonging were not pre-

ordained within the structure of colonial society. They were in fact fluid and negotiated political constructs that not only functioned to facilitate the oppression of the colonised but were also vital in keeping the colonial society itself in line. In the forward to her book, *Carnal Knowledge and Imperial Power* (2010: xxv), Stoler challenges the prevailing assertion that an increased presence of white women precipitated intensified racialist relations. She asserts that there was more evidence that it was the racial anxieties themselves that produced the new European demographics with their gendered effects. Her central theme (Stoler 2010:13), that 'students of colonialism, anthropologists in particular, have taken the politically constructed dichotomy colonizer/colonized as a given rather than as a historically shifting pair of social categories that needs to be explained', underpins the thinking behind this research which attempts to identify the true role of the British woman within the dynamics of the colonial societies of Malaya and Burma in the years between the two world wars. This research has followed Stoler's identification of colonial 'Otherness' as a force that not only underpins the concept of European supremacy but allows for the exploration of 'Otherness' within the European colonial community itself. This perspective allows European women to be identified as 'Other' from the standpoint of masculine colonial notions of superiority.

Equally pertinent is her contention, in her article Making Empire Respectable, (Stoler 1989) that European women in these colonies experienced the cleavages of racial dominance and internal social distinctions very differently than men precisely because of their ambiguous positions, as both subordinates in colonial hierarchies and as active agents of imperial culture in their own right.

Her hypothesis that gender-specific sexual sanctions demarcated positions of power by refashioning middle-class conventions of respectability, which, in turn, prescribed the personal and public boundaries of race also resonates with this research. So too, does her argument that:

> Colonial rhetoric on white women was riddled with contradictions. While new female arrivals were chided for not respecting the racial distance of local convention, an equal number of colonial observers accused these women of being more avid racists in their own right (Stoler 1989: 640).

As an anthropologist, Stoler relies heavily on her own work in the Dutch colonial archives regarding the Dutch presence in the plantation belt of Sumatra, using for comparison the Indo-Chinese French empire. Although she references the British imperial rule in India and Malaya, she does not analyse this to any great extent; however, by applying her questions to the situation in Malaya and Burma I have gained insights into the sexualised power balance and its effect on the British women resident there in that, like the Dutch and French women in Stoler's work, their ambiguous position within the British colonial societies was influenced by male imposed gender specific sanctions.

Multi-disciplinary cultural theory

The feminist cultural analyst Anne McClintock (1995: 9) begins *Imperial Leather* with the following words:

> One of the founding assumptions of this book is that no social category exists in privileged isolation; each comes into being in social relation to other categories, if in uneven and contradictory ways. But power is seldom

> adjudicated evenly – different social situations are overdetermined for race, for gender, for class, or for each in turn. I believe however that it can be safely said that no social category should remain invisible with respect to an analysis of empire.

These words seem particularly pertinent to the multifaceted analytical approach to the evidence I present in this thesis. Contrary to the stereotype presented by authors such as Maugham and Orwell, the British women in the colonial societies examined did not live in a perpetually socially static, self-generating bubble. It was necessary for them to negotiate their way through a fluid, often changing, complex social network, which, although sometimes informally 'policed' by other women, was the direct result of the ethos of imperial masculine superiority. My analysis is, of necessity, less wide ranging than McClintock's, focusing on the power dynamics between the various hierarchically stratified groups within the colonial societies of the British Southeast Asian colonies only. However, McClintock's model of gender as an articulated category, constructed through and by class, and as a regulatory discourse to manage class, has been a useful one to use in order to examine the microcosmic colonial societies with which this work is concerned.

Archival studies

Given that much of this research is archive-based, it has been necessary to examine current thinking on the integrity of the colonial archive as a source of information and knowledge. I have found the ideas underpinning Roque and Wagner's collection of essays in *Engaging Colonial Knowledge: reading European knowledge in world history* (2011) particularly helpful as an entry point into establishing a position apropos

research in colonial archives. The following quotation elegantly encapsulates the theoretical principles with which I undertook my archival research:

> Perhaps an immediate and important consequence of adding 'colonial' to 'knowledge' derives from the moral judgements implied, and which we intend to circumvent. European colonialism is often regarded as the 'dark side of modernity', as a historical moment of violence against which ethically superior, contemporary, post- or non- colonial worlds are frequently defined. This sometimes results in an inherently biased consideration of colonial knowledge as being epistemologically invalid and furthermore corrupted by its entanglement with the symbolic impurity of power and violence. The prefix 'colonial' usually has a pejorative meaning – a meaning that this book seeks to avoid (Roque and Wagner 2011: 21).

With the rise of the academic field of postcolonialism, the epistemic value and credibility of colonial accounts have become highly suspect in many quarters of academia where it is assumed that colonial knowledge is proscribed by its highly political, 'power saturated' condition. Accordingly, 'the centrality conceded to colonial knowledge by postcolonial critiques has been often accompanied by an a priori devaluation of its epistemological value as a valid description of realities exterior to European discourses and texts in themselves' (Roque and Wagner 2011: 9). Roque and Wagner argue that if colonial accounts are only read through an a priori lens of assumed power and bias, then evidence of important nuances both within and outside this spectrum may be missed: effectively, the baby may be thrown out with the bath water.

Roque and Wagner suggest 'reading strategies' that are pertinent to those working with the colonial archive with the intention of taking a more objective and nuanced view, the choice of which to use being determined by the object of the study.

The first of these strategies is for the reader to regard a colonial reading and recording both as strategies that were developed on the ground but also as dynamic and contingent on the historical context and the tensions/problems they contained or could generate. This approach has been crucial to my research in that it provides a multi-layered framework within which to examine the various checks and balances effecting the lives of the women with which it is concerned.

Roque and Wagner's second strategy suggests a reading of the colonial archives against the grain; i.e., to view and identify the words and agency of subjugated people within the archive. For my purposes, this is a useful tool on two levels: both to ensure the position and views of the colonised people within this narrative are acknowledged particularly with regard to their opinions on the British women and their place in society, and also to search against the grain in order to ensure that wherever possible the voice of the British woman herself and not that of her inevitably male hierarchical superior is heard.

The third strategy suggests that the reader should recognise that the archives are grounded in complex cross-cultural interactions and that 'colonial knowledge can entail the possibility of accounting for both indigenous and colonial worlds as an entwined reality' (Roque and Wagner 2011: 20). They suggest that colonial accounts represent inter-cultural objects and a variety of encounters and interactions between Europeans and non-Europeans. I contend that they can also be viewed as intra-cultural objects within the colonial society itself, in this case allowing me to examine the complexity of the British colonial society within which they were created and that, therefore, with a little adaptation, I have used these reading strategies in the course of my archival research.

Historical theory

As my research essentially depended on the interpretation of original archival material and of sources both anecdotal and scholarly from the decades under examination, historical theory cannot be ignored. However, given that the focus of my work is on a group of women who were a subsection of the dominant European colonial society, much of the valuable work that has been done on post-colonial history in terms of theory does not apply, in that it is designed specifically to both examine and analyse the dynamics of the relationship between colonialists and those they dominated with a view to relating those to the post-colonial positions of the colonised. The negative perspective through which the society of the colonialists themselves has inevitably been viewed has led to minimal modern analysis of this society on its own terms and that which has been undertaken has to a great extent been understandably pejorative in its findings. My aim, through this research has been to assign independent identity to British women through examining them and their position in the gendered dynamics of the stratified colonial society within which they lived. I have therefore viewed this society as far as possible, from a neutral and objective standpoint.

Review of the existing relevant literature

In my initial literature review, I explored relevant scholarship across a range of complementary academic fields, on the position of British women in Malaya and Burma in the 1920s and 1930s, as wives and, in comparison, in professional roles, specifically in medicine and nursing. My intention was to clarify academic opinions already held, through exploring what few analyses there are, both general and specific

by scholars, of the place of these women within the colonial society. I then juxtaposed these secondary sources against existing primary contemporary accounts of their lives and experiences by the women themselves and their family members to establish the argument that the perceived stereotypical view and that suggested by the male authored fiction, did not fit with the reality both in the domestic and the professional worlds in which these women were situated and where they situated themselves. A broad view of the existing literature falls into the following classes.

General overview of colonial life in Malaya in the 1920s and 1930s

In comparison to the current large body of work concerned with situation of the British in India, recent work on the contemporary community in Malaya seems to be relatively scarce. However, two helpful studies are Margaret Shennan's *Out in the Midday Sun: the British in Malaya 1880–1960* (2000), and John G. Butcher's *The British in Malaya 1880–1941: a social history of a European community in colonial South-East Asia* (1979). In both cases, the authors examine the society both as a whole and in sub sections; for instance, Shennan (2000: 149) devotes her section 'The Golden Years – 1920–1940' to the extension of colonial power both within the European community and the consolidation of hegemony by the establishment of a stratified colonial society and to the 'world', economic and social, of the 'Rubber Men,' the rubber planters who play such a large role in Maugham's fiction. Shennan's chapter 'The mem, the missie and the tuan kecil' (ibid. 263), was particularly pertinent as it provides a general description of British colonial family life in Malaya in the interwar years. It essentially focuses on the effect of this life on the upbringing of children but also includes

mentions of women who did not embody the expected male-dominated colonial norm of the female role.

In her own words (Shennan 2000: 20), the book ‘is an unofficial account, a collage of the British in Malaya, their lives, thoughts and reactions to events happening around them’. Shennan’s intention, by writing a linear history of the British in Malaya was to allow the reader to ‘hear’ their voices through interviews and memoirs. It is Shennan’s feeling that the colonialists have been judged to have feigned an altruism which purported to be concerned with the welfare and development of the indigenous population while the imperial ethic of the innate superiority of the white races ensured maintenance of a sealed and superior colonial society. She attempts to counter this view by presenting a more positive account of the British in Malaya and, while it should be read with a critical eye, the book contains a great deal of both factual and anecdotal material, as well as a wealth of references to original sources, that have made it invaluable to this research.

Butcher’s earlier work provides a more analytical and less anecdotal account of the same period in British Malaya and is therefore more valuable in contributing empirical background information regarding the structure of the colonial society in Malaya between the wars. Although both his and Shennan’s books cover a much wider timeline, Butcher’s initial focus on and examination of the economic conditions affecting the various scions of European society and how these, in turn, affected the marriage patterns and conditions is an analysis that proved a useful underpinning. Equally, his short section dealing with the position of women in Malayan colonial society as opposed to the metropole, and his chapter on the ‘Clubs and social structure in Kuala Lumpur’ (Butcher 1979: 147), provided a scholarly scrutiny of a situation which is anecdotally suggested in Shennan’s work.

Both Butcher and Shennan present what seems to be the generally accepted view in which British women in Malaya were viewed as adjuncts to their husbands' positions, whether civil, military, or commercial. Shennan (2000: 265) points out that in the 1930s, 'it was the colonial wife's role to support her husband wherever he went … there was a moral obligation on the mem to create the atmosphere of England in a foreign dwelling', while Butcher (1979: 161) notes that 'far more than in Britain, a woman's personality played a large part in her husband's chances of promotion'. Already, in these two quotations, there is an indication of the multifaceted nature of the wife's role in the colonial society, a concept that this thesis will investigate in detail. My research explores the reality of the lives of these women by refining the valuable but general work of Shennan (2000) and, more importantly, Butcher (1979), and by examining many of their sources in isolation, I was able to find the three-dimensional women behind the (often male-authored) memoirs and anecdotes.

Inbalance of material regarding women who went to Burma as opposed to those who went to Malaya

As I have already noted, there is a considerable volume of available work, both scholarly and anecdotal, that discusses the domestic and public lives and the influence, whether beneficial or malign, of the British memsahibs in India, with the works of Pat Barr (1989) and Margaret MacMillan (1996) representing the tip of a particularly large iceberg. However, there seems to be a paucity of academic evaluation of the lives of the British women who for various reasons went to the colonies of Malaya and Burma.

This is particularly the case as regards the women who went to Burma and this lack of interest would seem to support to the theory that Burma was regarded as an unwanted inconvenience to the Raj. Robert Taylor states that :

> From its inception in 1825 until eleven years before independence in 1948, Burma was in the eyes of the imperial government merely a distant provincial appendage of the Indian empire. (Butcher 1987: 69)

Mary Callahan also gives credence to this by describing Burma in the colonial period as a 'state … built by default, as no one in London or India ever mapped out a strategy for establishing governance in this outpost' (Callahan 2002 : 513). This contemporary tendency to treat Burma not as a separate entity but as an outpost of the Raj is reflected in historians' lack of interest in the British women who made their homes there, 'deep in the shadow of Britain's flagship colony, India.' (ibid: 513). Whereas, as I demonstrate above, although not as plentiful as those dealing with the memsahibs in India, there are various secondary sources providing information regarding the lives of women in Malaya, the women in Burma seems to be completely neglected.

The colonial medical service in Burma was an extension of the Indian Medical service which was itself independent from the Colonial Medical Service (CMS). In contrast to the CMS, although the Indian Medical Service did engage a small number of women doctors during the period under examination, they were employed specifically to work in the Indian purdah hospitals. Because of the cultural differences, purdah hospitals did not exist in Burma and therefore women doctors were not required there. Equally, almost all nursing duties in the Burmese hospitals were undertaken by male orderlies, many of them Indian. As a consequence the section

of the thesis (Chapters 4 & 5) that deals with women in the colonial medical services between the wars deal exclusively with women in Malaya and Singapore.

However, as far as primary archival sources are concerned, and ironically, because the administration of the Raj was so labyrinthine and thorough, where it was possible to find information regarding the women in Burma was in the archives at the India Office, which includes the records of the Burma Civil Service (a cadet branch of the Indian Civil Service) and the Burma Forestry Service. As a result, the final chapter of the thesis that focuses on the women as wives, the specific point of comparison to the fictional accounts of Maugham and Orwell and therefore arguably the most crucial section of the thesis, demonstrates a commensurate approach to the two colonies.

Personal reminiscences and memoirs

(1997), contains a series of memoirs, collected by the author, of European women's lives in Malaya and Singapore in the years immediately leading up to and during the Second World War. Teasdale, from Western Australia, who had started her career as a sociologist, became a proponent of and an interviewer in the West Australia Oral History project and went on to found the Oral History Association of Australia in 1978. Between 1978 and 1982, she met and recorded interviews with more than a hundred women who had lived in what was Malaya in the 1920s and 1930s. Unfortunately, I was unable to source the original interviews but Teasdale used eighteen of these to create her book which, in her words, honour a group of women who:

> … all looked forward, facing a life which by modern standards was full of difficulties, distress, discomfort and disaster, whether it was life in the jungle, on a rubber plantation, in a foreign city or in the confines of a prison camp (Teasdale 1997: xv).

For Teasdale, the focus is on the experiences of the women during the Japanese invasion when many were interned, and others narrowly escaped by precarious sea routes. However, for the purpose of my research, it is the descriptions of the lives they lived in pre-war Malaya that are of considerable interest and value.

One woman featured by Teasdale was Marian Firkins, from a humble background in rural Worcestershire; she left school when she was fourteen and had several jobs including that of an Inspector of Fuses in a munitions factory. In 1924, she met and married accountant Charles Firkins who had just been appointed to manage the finances of a group of rubber plantations in Malaya and Sumatra. Her account of her life, running her house on a large plantation and bringing up her young son whom she refused to send back to England for his education, gave an original and pragmatic slant on the topic that I have examined in further detail later in the thesis.

However, the most important chapter in Teasdale's book, in as far as it contributed to my research, is one which led to an in-depths analysis of the life and work of Dr Cicely Williams, one of the first female doctors in the Colonial Medical Service. Williams' pioneering work in starting a functioning welfare clinic system for mothers and babies and establishing good practice in the Department of Paediatric medicine in Singapore in the years preceding the Second World War made her a prime example of a British woman as different from the stereotypes portrayed by Maugham as it is possible to be.

Janice Brownfoot has produced four valuable publications regarding European women who lived in Malaya and their place in the colonial and indigenous society. They consist of two articles published in the *International Journal of the History of Sport* entitled 'Emancipation, exercise and imperialism: girls and the games ethic in

colonial Malaya' (Brownfoot 1990) and '"Healthy bodies, healthy minds": sport and society in colonial Malaya' (Brownfoot 2002). However, by far the most valuable contributions as far as my research was concerned are her contributing chapters: 'Memsahibs in colonial Malaya: a study of European wives in a British colony and protectorate, 1900–1940' (Brownfoot 1984), and 'Sisters under the skin: imperialism and the emancipation of women in Malaya c1891–1941' (Brownfoot 1990b). Here, Brownfoot (1990b) states that the memsahib was not an independent agent in a vacuum – and that the well worn charge that her bad manners and inability to interact at any but the most facile levels damaged the paternalistic image of the Raj and the superior status of the white colonials, is false. Unquestioned Imperial authority was certainly on the wane, but responsibility for this could not be laid at the feet of the women alone.

Brownfoot's thesis is that the Empire was organised by men for men and that the very presence and nature of women undermined this, by creating counter norms to the heroic, the masculine public school ethos on which many of the tenets of British imperialism rested. The roles created for women in the colonial experience, although designed to uphold the masculine imperial values, proved 'ambivalent, contradictory, and dualistic' (Brownfoot 1984: 67) in that the establishment of a domesticated European society tended to detract rather than support the myth of white masculine chauvinistic glory.

In the world of British imperialism, the public school virtues of 'manliness' and hierarchical paternalism predominated so that women were expected to play their part as their husbands' subordinate and helpmeet, whose responsibility it was to uphold the values and morals of the stratified society into which they had married. Brownfoot (Brownfoot 1984: 90) contends that this role seemed to be subverted by professional

women, many of them American, Irish, and Australian, who came to Malaya as educators, medical professionals, salaried workers, and missionaries. She argues that it was these women and the links they created with their indigenous sisters that subverted the imperial ethos and, while it improved the place of women within the 'subject' society, it also seemed to contradict the role created by European men for European women within the racially stratified colonial society. My research builds on Brownfoot's argument by examining not only the intricacies of the British women's relationships with women within the colonised society but also those within the colonial society itself to demonstrate their abilities to negotiate their position within both the macro and the micro society.

As in the chapters cited above and, in her articles, much of Brownfoot's work is concerned with the contribution towards the education and welfare of indigenous women in Malaya by British women. However, Brownfoot (1984) concentrates on the memsahibs (the wives of colonial administrators and businessmen). This important chapter gives an interpretive account of the lives and experiences of these women in colonial Malaya and the effect they had jointly and individually on the local and colonial situation. She describes the colonial Malayan community as being shaped by geographical and climatic conditions, Malaya's basic economic wealth created by raw materials, the nature and variety of her Asian populations, and the specific socio-political features of British colonial rule. Unlike for instance, the white-settler colonies of Australia and Kenya, in Malaya, wives were not seen to be an essential component, rather they were viewed as strategic in the maintenance of the myth of white superiority: 'white men marrying European women who, with male approval, helped to maintain a separate white enclave' (Brownfoot 1984: 190).

Male attitudes to white women were contradictory and ambivalent. To summarise her argument, Brownfoot (1984) feels European women were expected to maintain white privilege through separation, while men lived a double standard and then blamed the women when male behaviour led to loss of white prestige. In Brownfoot's opinion, again, it was the relationships and links established between 'mems' and local women that partly engendered this pejorative male view. My own position is very close to Brownfoot's in that her argument also underpins the view that the portrayal of European women in the male-authored fiction of the 1920s and 1930s is derogatory and based on a chauvinistic bias rather than the lived reality.

Colonial medicine with reference to Malaya

Lenore Manderson's work *Sickness and the State: health and illness in colonial Malaya, 1870–1940* (1996) presents an in-depth account of the introduction and application of Western medicine to the Malayan colonies. Many aspects of colonial society are covered from the original introduction of European doctors to maintain the health of the nascent European settlements to the attempt in the 1920s and 1930s to institute a countrywide scheme of welfare clinics. Much attention is paid to provision of rudimentary healthcare facilities, initially for plantation and mine workers, and gradually also for their families, as employers realised that healthy workers were more productive. Manderson discusses the problems of the interface between traditional and modern medicine and practice, where it was essential to build trust before any attempt could be made to effect changes. She also emphasises the gradual shift during the period on which she is focused from curative to preventative medicine. In this comprehensive account, Manderson is not specifically concerned with the place of European healthcare professionals working in Malaya at this time. Rather, she is

very concerned with women's health and particularly with maternity and paediatric services and it is in association with these specialisms that British women are mentioned.

According to Manderson, home visits by social workers or trained midwives began in Singapore in 1911, and followed within the next few years in Kuala Lumpur, Penang and Malacca. Many of these midwives and health visitors were European women, as native *bidan* (Malay for midwives), were not considered skilled and/or reliable enough to fulfil the roles although training was gradually being put in place for them. However, as her focus is on the disparity between the various indigenous groups and the pejorative view taken of the subject people in general by the colonialists, she does not elaborate on who these European women were or their own opinions of the positions in which they were placed.

The same is true of her analysis of schemes for medical training for local midwives and attendance at antenatal and postnatal clinics. However, Manderson (1996: 218) does point out that there were too few women doctors and nurses throughout the colonies, even though Malaya was better served than the others. In 1939, a total of 35 'lady doctors' were employed by the Colonial Medical service, 15 of whom were in the Straits Settlements and Federated Malay States. Malaya also had the most European nurses of any colony outside Africa.

In summary, Manderson explains the structure of medical services in colonial Malaya through a Marxist lens, as having originally been urban-based, hospital-centred and elitist, serving British officers and other colonial personnel and then gradually spreading from the colonial centre to the outlying areas to treat those whose ill health could threaten the ongoing commercial success of colonial enterprises. The introduction of preventative medicine and efficient sanitation was concomitant with the

penetration of the colonial economy into the hinterland and was supported by rural health programmes. These policies were driven by a pragmatic need to ensure the viability and effectiveness of the work force and thus, in Manderson's view, medicine as a cultural force becomes an agent of Western expansion and colonial dominance.

Manderson (1987) makes much the same argument in her article 'Health services and the legitimation of the colonial state: British Malaya 1786–1941'. Public health programmes in the twentieth century continued to focus on medical problems that had direct impact on the colonial economy, but programmes were extended to ensure the reproduction as well as the maintenance of the labour force. Her article develops the notion of a legitimation vacuum, and the role of the state provision of social services, including medical services, in legitimising colonial presence and control.

Manderson's theoretical analysis is both comprehensive and informative and contains evidence of the valuable contributions being made to healthcare in Malaya by a small but dedicated band of European women. One of the objectives of my research was to examine the lived experience of these women in more detail to ascertain to what extent their motivations and actions may, at least in some cases have been counter to or at least disparate from those of the colonial government, thus providing a contrast to the stereotypical trope of the subservient, male-

History of colonial medicine in Malaya and Burma in the 1920s and 1930s

It is interesting to note that, as early as 1928, the distinguished specialist in tropical diseases and head of the School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine, Andrew Balfour (1928:6), was in qualified favour of women doctors joining the Colonial Medical Service. At that time, the numbers of women doctors in the UK was still relatively

small: a survey of 1,000 of their members in Britain by the Women's Medical Foundation (45 did not respond) found 406 in general practice, 140 in specialist and consulting work, 127 working in hospitals or institutions, 156 in the public health field, 36 in research, and with 90 retired, some at the end of their career and some temporarily in order to raise children (Women's Medical Association : History).

One of these 'pioneering' doctors whose work was particularly pertinent to the situation in Malaya was Dr Mary Blackstock from the Liverpool School of Tropical Medicine who, in 1936 and 1937, toured Hong Kong, Malaya, Burma, Ceylon, Palestine, China, and India, to review what, if any, progress was being made in the institution of effective welfare systems for indigenous women and children. Her report was comprehensive, covering the position as regarded the health of women and children, methods of organisation and training that had been attempted and suggestions for improvement, the state of nursing, education and social welfare, the implications for agriculture and labour of these welfare systems and an outline plan for a new scheme of co-operative training and research (Blackstock 1942).

Among other progressive suggestions Blackstock encouraged the recruitment of more women doctors to the Colonial Medical Service with the rider that, if good female doctors were to be attracted to the Service, then they would need the inducement of the same pay rates and opportunities for advancement as their male colleagues. During a comprehensive trawl through the relevant documents in the National Archives (Kew), I found an original copy of Blacklock's report together with attendant correspondence in the shape of critical Civil Service memos and letters to and from Blackstock and the government officials who had commissioned the report. It appears that the report was shuffled from desk to desk and filed with no action to be taken until it was finally presented in 1942, some five years after the research had

been undertaken. By the time it was finally examined in 1942, the Southeast Asian colonies were falling into Japanese hands and consequently the report was shelved for the duration of the war. For reasons that beg further investigation, it was also classified until 1977, some 40 years after it was written.

To support the claim that women working in the medical profession contradict the stereotypic view of European women in general in Malaya at the time under scrutiny I examined examples of such women closely. One of the most notable is Dr Cicely Williams, discussed in Teasdale's book mentioned above. Born in 1893 into an originally Irish family but one that had settled in Jamaica since the late 1600s, she was among the first female graduates from Oxford. Responding to Balfour's call, she joined the Colonial Medical Service in 1929 and was initially posted to the Gold Coast (now Ghana), where, as well as setting up maternal and infant childcare services she successfully identified the protein deficiency known as Kwashiorkor which was taking the lives of many weanlings and which had previously been diagnosed as the vitamin deficiency Pellagra (Williams 1933). Her discovery and her ongoing desire to combine preventative and curative medicine caused her to clash with her male superior and in 1936, she was transferred to Singapore in disgrace.

It is the time Williams spent in Singapore and Malaya between 1936 and the Japanese invasion in 1942 that most concerns this research. An initial survey suggested that there are two main published sources of information available: *Retired except on demand: the life of Cicely Williams* (Craddock 1983) and *Primary health care pioneer: the selected works of Dr Cicely D Williams* (Baumslag 1986). The second of these is particularly valuable as it contains the four most important papers written by Williams during her years in Malaya before the Japanese occupation and her subsequent internment in Changi and Outram Road gaols. These are 'Common diseases of

children as seen in the General Hospital Singapore' (1938), 'Milk and murder' (1939), 'Whither welfare (1939) and 'An experiment in healthcare in Trengganu, Malaya, 1940–41' (1947).[3] 'Milk and murder', an outspoken criticism of companies marketing powdered or condensed milk as baby food and a demand for the reintroduction of breast feeding in all communities, was given initially as a speech to the Rotary Club of Singapore a civil association open to the rich and prosperous from all communities in Singapore. I have discussed this paper and its import in a later chapter but the vehemence and bellicose nature of this speech is an excellent indication of the independence and strength of mind and purpose of Dr Williams.

Sally Craddock's biography of Williams (1983) presents a picture of a strong, determined woman who, although she was regularly belittled by male colleagues, made practical and valuable contributions to the health and welfare systems extant in the Malayan colonies. Another useful attribute of this biography is that it includes details regarding Ida Mabel Murray Simmons, who joined the Straits Settlements Medical Department in December 1926 and became Singapore's first Public Health Nurse. In 1927, 263 babies out of every 1,000 died before the age of one in Singapore but by 1938 this number had drastically reduced to 86 per 1,000. Craddock's biography of Williams suggest that this was mainly due initially to Simmons' efforts to set up a successful system of 'wayside' welfare clinics, which Williams supported. More information regarding Simmons was found in the Singapore National Archive and in the archives of the primary English language newspaper of Singapore, the *Straits Times*.

However, by far the most useful archival source regarding Cicely Williams was a transcript of a long interview given to Ann Dally in 1966, which was found among

[3] Williams kept her notes for this paper hidden throughout her incarceration.

Williams' papers at the Wellcome Collection. This transcript allowed Williams' own voice to be heard and provided an invaluable record of her intentions and understanding of her place in the colonial societies in which she worked.

With the aid of both these books mentioned above and through interrogation of Dr Williams and Nurse Simmons' papers, I have written two chapters examining the roles of female doctors and nurses respectively which portray the lived experiences of these two women as examples of a strong, independent, professional woman in comparison with the weak, subservient, and trivial-minded stereotype of the European woman in Malaya.

Women as wives

The women who went to Burma and Malaya during the interwar years as the wives either of colonial officials, planters or businessmen came from a multiplicity of backgrounds; one of the many reasons that they present a particularly interesting area for research. Their place in the stratified colonial societies was very much dictated by their husbands' position, particularly if he was part of the colonial administration either in the Malay or the Indian/Burmese civil service. For instance, the wife of a Third Secretary would need to adapt, officially at least, to deferring to the wives of her husband's superiors. The wives of the planters and businessmen may not have been subject to such overt social ordering, although they too would have been unofficially 'ranked' within the local microcosmic colonial community, often exemplified by the local European Club of which they were part and where, again, their position would be very much dependent on their husbands' character, business acumen and ability to confirm to the accepted social norms.

An aspect of these women's lives revealed by my research which proved both interesting and informative was the amount of autonomy they managed to execute within this system, allowing themselves agency while balancing this with the requirements made of them by their immediate society. One area in which the colonial wife was autonomous was in the running of her household. Unlike middle class and upper middle class wives in the metropole, who were struggling to find and keep suitable numbers of servants in the interwar years, the colonial wife invariably had to manage several members of domestic staff. This could range from a relatively small household at an 'up country' forestry station in Burma probably consisting of a cook, one or two 'houseboys'[4]and a gardener, to a First Secretary's residence in Singapore or Kuala Lumpur with a whole kitchen brigade, numerous house servants, drivers, gardeners, and security staff. Research into the memoirs and letters of some of these women has demonstrated not only their ability to organise their staff and manage their households to maximise comfort and calm but also to work alongside their staff to achieve this. Often a 'head boy' or cook would have far more experience of how to manage things than a young newly married wife who had only just arrived in the country and, unlike Orwell's Elizabeth Lackersteen whose 'servants lived in terror of her', (Orwell 1935: 272) many of them realised this, and relied on rather than dominated their staff.

One of the most importance domestic alliances the colonial wife could make was that between herself and the person or people who cared for her children. Again, depending on the size of the household and the number of the children, this could be one *amah* or *ayah*[5] or a small nursery staff with one senior *amah* and several junior

[4] Adult male domestic servants were colloquially known as House Boys or Boys regardless of their age.

[5] *Amah* in Malaya or *ayah* in Burma – both were the equivalent of a nanny in England.

nursemaids. Again, many of these British women came to the colonies as young brides and, with a few exceptions, bore their babies there, therefore often an experienced *amah* gave great reassurance to a new mother and in several cases revealed in this research, the women became good friends.

Outside the home, the colonial wives took on a variety of roles. For those whose husbands were part of the colonial administration, their ability to organise and run social and charity events was much valued by the wives of their husbands' superiors and could be a factor in the husband's chances of promotion. For those situated in towns or larger settlements, involvement in voluntary associations such as the Girl Guides was popular, while women in more isolated situations in rubber plantations and forestry camps frequently set up first aid stations for the benefit of local workers, and villagers, and small market gardens to increase the variety of vegetables available both for their own families and for those of local people. Again, unlike Elizabeth Lackersteen in *Burmese Days,* many women took trouble to learn the local languages; indeed, in Burma, there are examples of wives taking the Civil Service Language Examinations along with their husbands.

Were the fissures that started to appear in the colonial state in the early twentieth century attributal to the women?

In her chapter 'The Myth of the Destructive Female' (Strobel 1991: 1) Strobel refers to both David Lean's remark that 'It's a well-known fact that women lost us the Empire. It's true.' (Callaway 1987 : 3) and to Spear's opinion that once British women started coming to India in significant numbers, they brought with them the whims and petty prejudices of the metropole which left them too insular to interest themselves in the peoples or culture of their new home (Spear 1963 : 140). What

follows will interrogate the reasons for the apparent trope blaming women for the loss of Britain's imperial possessions.

From the mid nineteenth century the imperial weltanschauung underwent a paradigmatic shift. Following the events of 1856/57, colonial power in India passed from the essentially military and commercial East India Company to a full civil colonial government staffed by a powerful expatriate Civil Service, members of which, because of advances in technology and travel, were frequently able to bring their wives. This change was concurrent with the growing Victorian doctrine of respectable Christian domesticity, which demanded a moral society with the family unit at its heart. These values were exported to the colonies and incorporated into the imperial policies which thus dictated that the wives should maintain, in their roles as home makers, the models of domesticity which should be seen in microcosm to reflect the harmonious government of the colony. Thus, together with the influx and influence of Evangelical Christian missionaries, the imperial mission became one where the focus had expanded from trade and conquest to include, if not to emphasise, the civilising mission so typical of the high Victorian colonial period.

Concurrently, as land appropriation increased, racial prejudice in the colonial society became more pronounced and the first stirrings of nationalist movements started to appear, the colonial administration's increasingly draconian responses led to cracks starting to appear in the system(Tharoor S.:2007). The patriarchal regime, incapable of self-criticism, looked beyond their own strategies for the reasons for this and found a scapegoat in the women, whose recent arrival had resulted in changes within the society.

> It was felt that the advent of the women in this hitherto essentially masculine world necessitated the establishment of a domestic life but that a wife and family

would distract a man from his official duties. Also, particularly since the events of 1856/57, the presence of the vulnerable British female was likely to enflame the passions of the indigenous men. In fact, the numbers of British women and children harmed during the Mutiny was greatly exaggerated in contemporaneous accounts and in the genre of 'Mutiny fiction' which will be discussed in greater length later in the thesis. However, the fear engendered led to strict lines of separation between the two communities being put in place, rigorously guarding these women from the dreaded worse than death at all costs.

The arrival of the wives also resulted in a sharp decline in the incidence of indigenous mistresses; an established practice pre-1857, which had allowed colonial administrators a unique insight into local society. This was resented in some quarters particularly by old India hands who missed the more laissez-faire days of the early nineteenth century and resented the strictures imposed upon them by the civil administration in Delhi.

Inevitably also, the instigation of a family centred colonial society lead to the establishment of its own hierarchies, resulting in an even greater distancing from the indigenous society (Strobel 1991: 1). These hierarchies were dictated by the stratifications of the male power structure but it was the duty of the women to maintain them. This meant that , when frustrated by the apparent pettiness and snobbery, the colonial men could absolve themselves and blame the growing social complexity and its attendant frustrations, on the women. This work will follow Knapman in her belief that citing gender as a reason for the decline of empire serves to absolve the actor from the consequences of his actions. The ideal and those who enact it remain unsullied and consequently excused of the responsibility when criticism of the ideal grows (Knapman: 1986: 175).

Did Maugham and Orwell perpetuate existing stereotypes or did they create them and to what extent have they persisted?

To what extent Maugham and Orwell were merely following existing stereotypes in their negative portrayals of British women in the colonies is relevant to this research. In Chapter 2 (p.48), I discuss Maugham's background, his essentially Victorian attitude to both imperialism and gender and its effect on his writing. Orwell adds real experience of life in a small colonial town in Burma to his own innate misogyny in the creation of his female characters. However, both must have inevitably been influenced by the increasingly negative view of British women in the colonies which persisted through the decline of empire and into the latter half of the twentieth century as demonstrated in the quote from David Lean that prefaces this thesis and in the work of historians such as Spear. (Spear 1963)

Were Maugham and Orwell the source of the stereotypes, or were they just perpetuating existing stereotypes? As I have already shown in the above section of my introductory chapter, both were writing at a time when British women in the colonies were already being perceived in a passive and increasingly negative light. Maugham's Malayan short stories, which are always told from a male point of view, crystallise these general feelings of antipathy into distinct characters who are flawed to the extent that the reader's sympathies are engaged with their male counterparts and not with them. Orwell, although 'Burmese Days' was not published until 1935, created equally contemptible female characters in what are believed to be thinly veiled portraits of British women he encountered in his time in the Burma Police between 1922 and 1927. In both cases therefore, this trope of the shallow, malicious British woman was already part of the contemporary mindset, and thus Maugham and Orwell's characterisations merely served to confirm and accentuate the stereotype.

That the stereotype has persisted can best be illustrated by the lasting popularity of film, television and theatre version of Somerset Maugham's short story, 'The Letter'. The short story will be analysed in greater detail in Chapter 3 below, however, it's enduring popularity can be judged by its lasting appeal. Initially, Maugham adapted the short story into a play, also called *The Letter* which opened at the Playhouse Theatre in London in 1927, starring Gladys Cooper and directed by Gerald du Maurier (father of the famous Daphne) where it ran for 50 weeks. In the same year the Broadway production starring Katharine Cornell sold out for 104 performances. During the 1930s and '40s, the play was frequently revived in the many provincial repertory theatres throughout the UK and in the 1970s it appears again in a touring production from the Triumph Apollo Management starring Honor Blackman and Philip Latham. The play returned to the West End in 1995 at the Lyric Hammersmith with Joanna Lumley and Tim Piggot-Smith and the most recent professional production was at Wyndham's Theatre on St Martin's Lane, starring Jenny Seagrove and Anthony Andrews (Cochrane: 2011).

The famous film of 'The Letter' starring Bette Davis and directed by William Wyler was released by Warner Brothers in 1940 but this had been preceded by a Paramount production in 1929, directed by Jean de Limur as well as adaptations in French, German, Spanish and Italian. The first television version appeared in America in 1950 starring Madeleine Carroll and this was followed in 1952 by a version with Sylvia Sidney and in 1956 in the Producer's Showcase series. The first British television production was made for Sunday Night Theatre on the BBC in 1956 with Celia Johnson in the lead role. More British television productions followed in 1960 as part of the Somerset Maugham collection and in 1969 in a stand-alone production

starring Eileen Atkins and directed by Christopher Morahan. In 1982, a television film starring Lee Remick and Ronald Pickup received excellent reviews.

Without exception, all dramatic versions of 'The Letter' stay faithful to Maugham's original short story, thus underpinning the portrayal of Ethel Proudlock in the character of Leslie Crosbie as a vengeful, cold hearted, immoral murderess; a portrayal which helped create the negative image of the colonial wife. Phebe Shih Chao's analysis of Wyler's film version through a post-colonial lens in 'Reading 'The Letter' in a Post-Colonial world' demonstrates how the film can be viewed as a negative critique of the European presence in colonial South East Asia with the character of Leslie Crosby portrayed as a caricature of the spiteful, vengeful, immoral but finally ruined memsahib (Chao: 1997).

The negative portrayal of the colonial wife also appears in fiction in a selection of novels, films and television series that postdate Maugham and Orwell's work. In 1956, Mary McMinnies, herself the wife of an official on General Templar's staff during what became known as the Malayan Emergency, published her novel *The Flying Fox,* set in the small British society in the imaginary town of Telegu, a collection station for the surrounding rubber estates (McMinnies: 1956). Of her leading female characters, Anne Farrar, the wife of the Police chief is desperately unhappy and begins an affair with the town's Eurasian doctor, Doris Allingham, an ex-barmaid, is cheerfully unaware of how the other wives belittle her, calling her 'brassy', and whose husband is thus ashamed of her and Marjorie Hall, married to a younger, rather likeable, chancer, is an alcoholic whose first gin-and-tonic arrives soon after breakfast. Between them, they embody the characteristics associated with Maugham and Orwell's female characters.

J.G.Farrell's novel *The Singapore Grip* published in 1978, recounts the final days before the fall of Singapore through the lens of the Blacketts, one of the colony's

leading merchant families who have been trading in Singapore for several generations. The two female members of the household are Sylvia Blackett, the somewhat two-dimensional matriarch whose main aim in life is to see her children married well. Her daughter Joan, raised in privilege in Singapore and a Swiss finishing school, believes absolutely in her own superiority. and manipulates and exploits all around her. Farrell writes with critical irony about the soon to be destroyed colonial society and its failings but his British female characters still display the negative characteristics found in Maugham and Orwell's characterisations (Farrell, J.G.: 1978). Anthony Burgess's *Malayan Trilogy* (Burgess, A.:1956-59), set in the years between the end of the Second World War and the coming of Malaysian independence is to an extent autobiographical (Burgess went to Malaya as an Education Officer in the 1950s) and tracks the fortunes of Victor Crabbe, a history teacher posted the Malayan Education Service, his professional difficulties, his marriage problems, and his attempts to do his duty in the war against the Communist insurgents. Although far from critical to the thread of the narrative, two of the main female characters typify the trope of the destructive female discussed above. Fenella, Crabbe's second wife, is a frustrated poet who hates Malaya and spends her days in bed reading Jane Austen until she can finally bear it no more and returns to England, while Anne Talbot, the wife of Crabbe's boss, despises her colonial existence and is serially unfaithful to her husband.

With the exception of *Burmese Day*s, there seems to be a scarcity of narrative writing by Europeans set in colonial Burma and the limitations of this thesis forbid me from exploring the wealth of fiction set in the India of the Raj, albeit that it is here one might find the roots of the stereotype this section of the chapter has interrogated. However, if Michael Charney is correct in his statement that 'it could be suggested

that pehaps more foreigners over the years have read George Orwell's *Burmese Days* than any other single publication about the country' (Charney : 2009) then one could consider that this book on its own has made a sizable contribution to the continuation of the myth.

Research methods

Given that the focus of my research was on a society that existed in the 1920s and 1930s, it was inevitable that almost all of it was informed by archival and library-based investigation. As noted, the research on British women in the colonies of Malaya and Burma during this era has been neglected in comparison with the body of scholarship concerned with their male counterparts and with contemporary British women in India. To build up a fuller picture of the women in Burma and Malaya, I examined the small body of extant secondary sources but fundamentally my evidence comes from intensive trawls through archives for previously unexamined sources which took the form of memoirs, correspondence, diaries and administrative reports as well as articles from contemporary local and international newspapers. To this end, I used the following primary sources:

- The private archive of the family of A.J.S. and Joan White

  I was fortunate enough to be introduced to Mrs Mary Spender, daughter of A.J.S. White of the Indian Civil Service (henceforth ICS) and his wife Joan who were in Burma in the 1920s and 1930s. She and her brothers allowed me unlimited access to their private archive of their mother Joan's letters and diaries from her time in Burma and these, along with her children's memories of her have made an invaluable contribution to my research.

- The India Office Records and Archives at the British Library

  The India Office Records provided a uniquely valuable source of papers, memoirs and reports pertinent to the period under investigation particularly where the colonial society in Burma is concerned.[6] The great majority of the personal memoirs and papers it contains are male authored but my trawl through them revealed the papers of Mrs Ruth Donnison extant within the archive of her husband, F.S.V Donnison (ICS); of Nell Hughes, within the archive of her husband, a Colonial Officer in Burma; and Mrs Enid Dawkins, the wife of a Forestry Officer in Burma (and the great aunt of the eminent biologist, Richard Dawkins).

- The Weston Library (Bodleian Library, Oxford)

  The archive of the Colonial Nursing Service is held at the Bodleian and this has proved an extremely valuable and relatively untouched source of firsthand evidence regarding the lived experience of women who went as nurses to the Straits Settlements and the Federated and Unfederated Malay States in the years between the wars.

- The National Archives, Kew

  The archives held at Kew proved valuable on two counts. Firstly, it is here that records pertinent to the Proudlock trial,[7] the basis for Somerset Maugham's famous short story 'The Letter' and discussed further in chapters 2 and 3, are housed. These were clearly used by Eric Lawlor (2000) as a basis for his book *Murder on the Verandah: love and betrayal in British Malaya*, although he does

[6] Burma was ruled from Delhi as a province of greater India until 1937 when it was recognised as a colony in its own right.

[7] The trial of Ethel Proudlock for murder in 1912 was the basis for Somerset Maugham's famous short story 'The Letter'.

not cite them. Having spent considerable time with these papers it is my contention that Lawlor missed a vital piece of evidence that appears to throw a new light on the story – one which is particularly pertinent to the place of British women in the colonial society of Malaya. Indeed, Lawlor in his portrayal of Ethel Proudlock perpetuates Maugham's stereotype of British women, whereas, as I show, the situation was quite different.

The National Archives also hold the archives and records of the Colonial Office which have given me access to reports and correspondence regarding medical practice on Malaya and Burma.

- The Wellcome Collection, London

  The Wellcome Collection provided useful material in that it holds most of the papers of Dr Cicely Williams, working in Malaya in the decade before the Second World War. Of these papers, the transcript of Williams' interview in 1966 with Ann Dally proved most valuable for my research on Women in Medicine.

- National Archives of Singapore

  I visited these archives in November 2019, which provided useful source material on the domestic life of Ann Muriel Gammans, whose husband was a prominent member of the Malayan Civil Service. Also of interest were 'household manuals' published privately during the 1920s and 1930's. I had planned a second visit to be combined with a visit to the Arkib Negara in Kuala Lumpur as well as a possible trip to Myanmar. However, the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic made these impossible and, consequently, apart from my

research in Singapore, the thesis relies on in-depth work on available existing sources within the UK or online.

Overview of the thesis

Proceeding from this introductory chapter, which has set out the context for the research, listed the research questions, reviewed relevant theoretical approaches, and reviewed existing work on the topic, as well as the research methods used, the subsequent two chapters focus on the stereotype of the colonial wife, specifically within the works of Somerset Maugham and George Orwell. In Chapter 2, I examine the wider picture of the literary life of the metropole during the interwar years with specific reference to the works of Maugham and Orwell and the influence on them of a series of contemporary literary tropes. These tropes include the significance of the 'angel in the home', the Victorian ideal of subservient womanhood, the rise of the mythical literary concept of the 'brown skinned rapist in popular fiction after the Indian War of Independence (the Mutiny) of 1857, and the increasingly jaundiced view of the Imperial ideals taken by male British authors following the First World War.

Chapter 3 looks specifically and in analytical detail at women of Maugham and Orwell's fiction and how these stereotypes affected the perception of the reality of women in these colonial possessions both at the time and subsequently. I compare Leslie Crosbie in Maugham's 'The Letter' with Ethel Proudlock, the woman on whom Maugham based his character, to demonstrate the difference between the fictionalised character and the reality. This chapter also contains evidence from the trial records regarding Ethel Proudfoot which rather than a manipulative Jezebel, proves her to be a victim of the chauvinistic colonial society.

Chapters 4, 5 and 6 turn to the lived experience of British women in Malaya and Burma, organised according to their [profession/social position]. In Chapter 4, I provide an overview of the state of colonial medicine in the interwar years and the attitude of the essentially masculine medical profession to the increasing numbers of women joining their ranks both at home and abroad. I reveal specific attempts of female health professionals to change the emphasis of colonial medicine from curative to preventative treatment, and to improve both maternity service and infant nutrition and care in both the colonial and indigenous societies, frequently against the wishes of their male superiors. Substantial research into the life and work of Dr Cicely Williams undertaken at both the National Archives (Kew) and the Wellcome Collection provided me with valuable material to demonstrate how a woman of her position in British colonial Southeast Asia needed to be able to negotiate a complex web of social and professional interaction.

Chapter 5 draws on detailed research into the lived experience of Sister I.M.M. Simmonds and other women who served in the Colonial Nursing Service to clarify the ambiguous position of nursing sisters specifically in the Straits Settlements and the Federated and Unfederated States of Malaya. My research in the archives of the Colonial Nursing Service, held at the Bodleian Library in Oxford indicates not only that this was a body of strong, dedicated professionals but also that this was a group of women who took a good deal of pleasure and interest in their surrounding and the indigenous people among whom they lived and worked.

An in-depth examination of British women in the domestic/plantation setting whom Callan and Ardener (1984) have christened ‘incorporated wives’ is the subject of Chapter 6. To demonstrate these women’s ability to juggle successfully within the hierarchical colonial society, revealing them to be pro-active capable women, I have

sub-divided their lived experiences into the following categories: the formal and ceremonial aspects of life for colonial wives, domestic and home management, family health, childbirth and children, out of home charitiable and philanthropic activities, and the women's views of and relationships with other women both in the local and the colonial societies .

By interrogating their true position in the social spectrum of their existence in the hierarchical societies of the colonists, I have shown a more nuanced and less pejorative portrayal of the women in Burma and Malaya in the 1920s and 1930s, strong women who, as my research shows, in many cases were extremely practical and self reliant, overcoming domestic, medical and personal difficulties and taking active interest and enjoyment in the societies to which marriage or work had brought them. I have shown how many of them formed lasting relationships and even friendships with women of the colonised communities, relationships which cut across the officially maintained racial boundaries imposed on them by the male-led colonial power structure. It should not be forgotten that these were the women who were to spend several years of the following decade in Japanese prisoner-or-war camps, where, without the 'protection' of the colonial hierarchy, many of them managed to order themselves with laudable efficiency and to survive .

Chapter 2 – The hinterland of the myth

This chapter explores the social, cultural and literary hinterland of Somerset Maugham and George Orwell's fiction. I review various contemporary social and political influences to assess their effects on society in general and then specifically on these authors. Relevant literary criticism is also analysed to ascertain the extent to which critics have considered the authors' characterisations of British women within their work and why this facet of the work seems to have been neglected. Towards the end of the chapter, I appraise the extent to which the authors were influenced by synchronic literary tropes.

In taking an overview of the characterisation of the English woman in Southeast Asia as found in the works of Maugham and Orwell, I have not ignored the influence both on British society in general and also on the authors of the rapid social and political changes which were characteristic of the first half of the twentieth century. More efficient and swifter means of communication meant that Southeast Asia in the past, so exotic and mysterious when it had taken so long to get there and communications had been so slow and unreliable, became more familiar. Previously, colonial servants and merchants and their families (if they were able to take them), journeyed to Asia in the knowledge that they would not return to Europe for many years, if at all. However, modern maritime transport meant that tours of duty lasted at the most approximately three years before a long home leave was possible. If the post was considered to involve true 'hardship' then leave was available after eighteen months. By the late 1930s, there were regular commercial flights, mostly operated by Dutch airline, KLM, between Western Europe and the Southeast Asian colonies, and the mail took weeks rather than months to arrive. Thus, as the metropolitan society became more familiar

with the commonplace of life in these areas, its conception of colonial society became less exotic.

Contributing to this developing mindset were the changes in criteria for recruitment into the colonial administrations following the significant reduction of suitable male candidates after the losses of the First World War. At the same time, less emphasis was given to military control and more to rigidly hierarchical societies being regulated by a hegemonic civil administration. The ICS no longer creamed off the 'brightest and the best' from the great British universities and men from smaller public schools and grammar schools were recruited into the mid ranks of the executive civil services and by the trading companies. After the First World War, Barbara Bush says, 'the ultra-masculine ethos of the Colonial Service was tempered as the brave "frontier days" of the imperial "hero" (often from a military background) gave way to bureaucratic consolidation and development of the colonial infrastructure' (Bush 2016 84). Thus, the decline in the Victorian concept of the Imperial servant as socially exclusive and heroic, and entry into the ranks of the colonial administrations of a wider social mix together with a growing familiarity within the metropole with colonial life in general led to a change to a more critical and prosaic perception of life in the Southeast Asian colonies.

However, within colonial societies, these changes in style led to conflicting social mores within which British women needed to be able to negotiate a careful path. Essentially, they were required to maintain the moral standards by which the Empire judged itself and, whether as the wives of up-country district officers or planters or of higher ranking administrative officers in colonial metropolitan centres, they lived in tight knit, claustrophobic societies where their every move was judged. Yet, despite the strict divisions within the society between colonists (white/superior)

and colonised (coloured/inferior), many of these women were married to men who, in their previous bachelor existence had cohabited with native women as concubines. The contradiction is obvious.

Colonial wives and miscegenation

According to Butcher (1979: 196), the British (men) in Malaya at the end of the nineteenth century 'felt themselves to be relatively unrestrained by the late Victorian convention which preached the virtue of sexual continence'. They reasoned that because they could rarely enjoy the company of women of their own race and were mostly contractually prevented from marrying until they could afford to keep a wife in a manner which upheld the social and financial superiority of the colonial society,[8] they could hardly be blamed for indulging their sexual appetites, which they believed were enhanced by the 'languorous' tropical climate, with women from the local population who, apparently, lived by different and less repressive standards of sexual behaviour.

Unlike their colleagues who lived in the towns, where brothels housing prostitutes of varying nationalities could be visited,[9] young men who lived 'up-country' on 'stations' where there were few other Europeans or on large, isolated plantations, frequently took a local woman to live with them as both a sexual partner and a companion. British recruits employed to work on Malayan rubber plantations were furnished with information booklets that encouraged them to take local 'companions'

[8] Within the Colonial Service, permission had to be given for an officer to marry and was usually withheld until after two terms of service. The same strictures were generally the case in the commercial world, where marriage was discouraged until a man had established himself in his career.

[9] Japanese brothels were the most popular as the girls had the reputation of being compliant and clean.

to speed acclimatisation, and insure against the 'ill-health that sexual abstention, isolation and boredom were thought to bring' (Butcher 1979: 200, 202; Stoler 1989: 637). Sir Malcolm Watson, a doctor who arrived on the Malay peninsula in 1900 and remained there for over 30 years, claimed that in 1909, 90% of the European men, living outside the main towns of both the Straits Settlements and the Federated Malay States kept concubines (Culpin 1933: 920). The following quote from Sir Richard Windstedt is a good example of how these men justified their behaviour:

> No homelife, no women friends, no libraries, no theatres or cinemas, not always a big enough community for tennis or bridge, no motor cars, no long walks on account of the labyrinth of trackless jungle; was it any wonder that the white exile took himself to one of the complaisant, amusing, good tempered and good-mannered daughters of the East? (Winstedt 1966 18).

Thus, this situation is one in which the man has agency: it was his choice to take a mistress in the first place and, equally, his choice to eventually discard her and marry an English woman. In the concubine's case, although financial arrangements may have been put in place for her and her children, she was effectively disappeared from a situation where she had never officially been recognised. The wife, meanwhile, was expected to disregard any evidence of her husband's life before their marriage; whatever the cost to herself might be. Maugham and Orwell's fiction presents representations of this set of contradictory moral norms, as will be seen later in the chapter. It is clear that the men involved permitted themselves to behave in a way that would not have been tolerated in the overtly racially based mores of the metropole. However, in both cases, double standards were evident. Many colonial memoirs (Bilainkin 1933; Braddell 1982; Purcell 1965; Winstedt 1969) on the early part of the

twentieth century record arriving at a plantation house to find a young Malay woman slipping into the background and certainly, once a young man gained promotion to the extent where he could afford to marry, his mistress (and possibly their children) were to be ‘paid off’ and sent back to the kampong. On the rare occasions when inter-racial marriage took place, the family was socially ostracised. What was of fundamental importance in colonial society was that these two worlds were never acknowledged to have interacted. If a young unmarried man kept a local mistress as part of his household, the fact could be well known but never spoken of in the colonial community so long as both the man and his mistress were discreet. At the end of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth centuries, this laissez faire attitude meant that concubinage, although relatively common and known to be so in the male-dominated community, was never publicly acknowledged.

Into this social situation, at the beginning of the twentieth century came a substantial influx of British women. Many came as brides or fiancées, who would marry as soon as they arrived, and some came out ‘for a season’ 'in the hope of catching’ a husband. A few came in search of work, as will be seen in later chapters of this thesis which deal with women in the medical professions. This redressing of the balance of the sexes in the British community, combined with improved transport and communications meant that the ‘lonely’ single man at the mercy of his own desires, which were apparently increased by the climate, found it harder to justify taking a local mistress. However, he was left with the ‘problem’ of how to deal with pre-existing relationships when he finally married. Many men made financial settlements on their native mistresses and some even provided for the education of any children of the union, but the unwritten rule was that the mistress ‘disappeared’ with the appearance

of the wife. Equally, should the past relationship come to the wife's knowledge once she had married, she was expected merely to view it as a regrettable incident in her now sexually continent husband's past, forgive it and move on, never to refer to it again.

Colonial ideology based on white supremacy always had a contradictory relationship with miscegenation. In her analysis of how European women were essential to the Imperial venture and in the creation, acceptance and maintenance of racial boundaries, Stoler (1989) shows that their positioning within imperial politics was powerfully reinforced at the turn of the century by a metropolitan rhetoric intensely concerned with notions of 'degeneracy'. Morality, masculinity and motherhood were seen to be threatened by the intimately linked fears of 'degeneration' and miscegenation. So called 'scientific' beliefs apparently justified overt racism and that the degeneracy resulting from miscegeny could be avoided positively by eugenic selection, or negatively by eliminating the 'unfit' (Stoler 1989: 643). In the Southeast Asian colonies, the arrival of British women as wives, thus eliminating the apparent 'need' for indigenous concubines, was seen by the patriarchal hierarchy as a solution to the problem of miscegenation.

However, as with much of colonial life, this situation is one in which the men have agency over the women in both the colonised and colonial society. Maugham and Orwell's fiction presents representations of this set of [contradictory] moral norms, as I will show in the following chapter. However, I will consider extant criticism of the two authors and provide an overview of the tropes that underpinned their depictions of British women in colonial Malaya and Burma.

Maugham and his critics

For many years, Maugham's work was excluded from the syllabuses of Western universities. Aesthetically, it was felt to be lacking in depth by both traditional literary critics and exponents of New Criticism[10] and Maugham's confidence in intentionality and the writerly craft was felt to be, if not misplaced, then certainly naïve. Maugham's narration, particularly in the Malayan short stories, is linear and without nuance. He invariably uses a male narrator to 'tell' a story which has usually been relayed to him by another colonial male. Any characters not specifically relevant to the plot are rarely explored and the plot itself depends on the acceptance by the reader of the value set within which the characters move. Such narrative style surely does not readily provide the textual discontinuities and aporias beloved of post-colonial critics; the stories' seamlessness makes it difficult to locate 'the indeterminate moment when specificity is dissolved' (Spivak 1986: 229), or the ambiguity of which Homi Bhabha and Robert Young, among others have argued is central to colonial discourse' (Holden 1996).

Philip Holden is one of the very few modern academics to examine Maugham's work. In *Imperial Desire: dissident sexualities and colonial literature* (Holden and Ruppel 2003), Holden's focus is on Maugham's homosexuality and its effect on the dissident sexualities underlying what he sees as the tensions in colonial fiction, a theory he then developed in *Orienting Masculinity, orienting nation: W. Somerset Maugham's exotic fiction* (Holden 1996). Here, he attempts to read Maugham as 'a writer whose homosexuality places him at the fracture points of narrative constructions

[10] New Criticism was a formalist movement that dominated American literary criticism in the mid twentieth century. It emphasised close reading with the object of discovering how a work of literature functioned as a self-contained aesthetic object. The movement took its name from John Crowe Ransom's *The New Criticism* (1941). In the UK important contributions to the development of New Criticism methodology can be found in the work of I.A Richards, particularly in *Practical Criticism* (1929) and *The Meaning of Meaning* (Ogden and Richards 1923). T.S. Eliot's notions of 'a theory of impersonality' and the 'objective correlative' were also highly influential in the development of New Criticism in the British academe.

of masculinity and sexuality, from which no further cracks may be traced to the imagined communities of race and nation' (Holden 1996: 2).

Holden's contention is that colonial texts such as Maugham's thus emphasise British masculinity. They also amplify the duality of colonial discourse which depends on Othering, and incorporates the Other at its rhetorical centre. This is evident in the Malayan short stories in Maugham's tendency to use the device of an uninvolved story teller, thus 'othering' the story from the storyteller and, within the narrative itself, by his use of condescension and supercilious superiority in the storyteller's opinions of the European female characters.

Holden also contends that the masculinity of Maugham's white men is not so much defined by its fully fledged imposition on the quiescent Orient but created through continual comparison of Self/Other in which the 'feminised' East passively demands the increasingly dominant masculine traits that identify the colonial man. Thus, colonial masculinity can be perceived not as being exclusively dominant but as being profoundly ambivalent in its need for and yet continual separation from the Orient. For Holden, this ambivalence is relevant to Maugham's portrayals of the male colonial characters and in particular, their sexuality. He quotes Said (1978 : 213), who specifies the Orient as the 'place where one could look for sexual experience unobtainable in Europe'. The colonial man is presented with a paradox in which he must support the normative sexual binary that the colonial hegemonic demands while subconsciously – or, indeed, consciously but covertly – viewing the Orient as a place of licentiousness and deviance.

Holden (1996) uses this permeable ambiguity underlying the concept of colonial masculinity as a lens through which to examine the place of homosexuality within the

sexual paradigm of colonial society and to assess to what extent it is possible to foreground Maugham's own, necessarily closeted, homosexuality when analysing his 'exotic fiction'. For the purposes of this research, however, the same concept of reciprocal ambivalence in the formation of colonial masculinity offers a censorious view of colonial women and their place in that society. As Holden (1996: 19) says, 'Maugham's memsahibs are almost uniformly passionately sensual, expressing an unbridled sexuality that reinforces, through contrast, the coolly rational masculinity of his narrators.' Thus, although not representing the full binary opposition to the essential colonial masculinity, the 'mem' in Maugham's Malayan fiction can be viewed as being somewhere on the spectrum between the two. While acknowledging that Maugham's own sexuality undoubtedly influenced his writing, it would seem profitable to view his female protagonists through the lens of the variety of sexual tensions discussed in both of Holden's publications.

Christine Doran's 2019 article, 'Maugham on Myanmar: gender trouble and imperial decay', is an analysis of Maugham's travelogue *The Gentleman in the Parlour: a record of a journey from Rangoon to Haiphong* (1930), in which she presents Maugham as essentially a populist but one who, through his popularity, played an important part in the construction of the British Southeast Asian colonies in the contemporary and subsequent public imaginations. In this travelogue, Maugham seems to recognise the beginning of the decline of the masculine colonial body as a sort of emasculation which will inevitably break down Britain's imperial dominance. 'Virtually all the stories recounted (in the travelogues) involve women and, in every case,' Doran (2019: 23) argues, 'the woman is cast in a dominant position vis a vis colonial men.'

Maugham's female characters are certainly plentiful but they tend to be portrayed as either malicious, arrogant or unimaginative and eccentric. If they have power, then they tend to misuse it. However, Doran's theory that Maugham's male characters are frequently portrayed as weak and indecisive both in their personal and their official lives, is relevant to the thrust of this thesis in that she claims Maugham sees in these 'second rate' people the decay and decline of the British imperial power. Born in 1874, Maugham was essentially a Victorian and although his loveless upbringing from the age of ten and the need to publicly suppress his homosexuality may have contributed to the innate cynicism in his writing, he was clearly influenced by what, for his generation, was the Empire 'upon which the Sun never set'. Unlike Orwell, who was deeply anti-imperial, Maugham was profoundly imbued with the biases, assumptions and values of Western imperialism, including a belief in the hierarchical distinctions of race, gender and class. His *oeuvre* of short stories and travelogues set in the South Seas and the British Southeast Asian colonies, were written at a time when British power and authority had peaked and was on the cusp of a downward trajectory as it began to be challenged by rising nationalist movements. The resulting cynical and disparaging characterisations in Maugham's fiction are symptomatic of this frustration in that their seeming failure to control their personal situations can also be read, in the case of his male characters, as a metaphor for their inability to curb the social and political decline as he perceived it. The fact that the actions and attitudes of his female characters appear to exacerbate the situation creates a critical view in the reader of these women which this research will attempt to correct by counterposing it with the lived experience of the women of whom Maugham writes in such a derogative style.

Orwell and his critics

Unlike Maugham, whose work was popular with the wider reading public within his own lifetime but then fell out of fashion, Orwell's writing did not gain real popularity until the middle of the twentieth century, particularly after the Second World War. Orwell (or Eric Blair, to give his true name) has subsequently become regarded as one of the best essayists of the modern era (James 2023: 3). His fiction has engendered much critical acclaim with two of his later novels, *1984* (1949) and *Animal Farm* (1945) regarded as seminal works in twentieth century English literature and the adjective 'Orwellian' has become synonymous with the dystopian and totalitarian world described in his books. The critic Jeffrey Meyers (1975: 12) has described Orwell as 'more widely read than perhaps any other serious writers of the 20th century'.

Of all Orwell's writings, the novel *Burmese Days* has probably attracted the least critical attention. Cyril Connolly, in the *New Statesman(1935)* praised the book, while D.J Taylor (2004: 231) judged it to be 'A study in failure' at the surface level, the failure of Flory, the protagonist, but also as metaphor for the failure of the Raj itself. It is thought that Orwell based the incidents and characters of *Burmese Days* on his time as a colonial policeman in Upper Burma in the 1920s, using his experience to voice his loathing for the Imperial system and all it represented. Any scholarly character studies have concentrated on the male characters, both British and Burmese, and how they personify a system that is immoral, racist, corrupt, and at the point of disintegration.

However, in 2009, Sutida Wimuttikosol, of Thammasat University in Bangkok published an article called 'Colonialism and patriarchy: interwoven powers in *Burmese Days'* interwoven plots', in which she contends that gender in the novel have been left almost untouched by critics. Wimuttikosol's article seeks to 'cast some light on the

nature of power. Because the two powers [i.e. colonialism and patriarchy] in the novel work interdependently, it can be said that a particular power does not have a “center” within itself. It can be exercised and maintained through other kinds of power, which means many participants are included’ (Wimuttikosol 2009: 18).

Wimuttikosol analyses the two power structures separately before demonstrating how they intertwine to form a complex construct within which the characters negotiate their paths. She (Wimuttikosol 2009: 23–24) considers the formation of the colonial family to be one of the major threads in the part of the plot concerned with the Imperial power structure and clarifies the parts played in it by Flory and Elizabeth Lackersteen as follows:

> Home is also what Elizabeth, a young English lady, craves. As a woman, she is in exile both in England, her homeland, and in British Burma. Insulted by her employer in England, she is abused by her uncle in Burma. Ellis’ abusive speech about her further reveals the contempt felt by colonial agents for white women who ‘come out’ to the colony:
>
> > “As if it wasn’t well known! When a girl’s failed everywhere else she tries India, where every man’ s pining for the sight of a white woman. The Indian marriage-market, they call it. Meat market it ought to be. Shiploads of ’em coming out every year like carcasses of frozen mutton, to be pawed over by nasty bachelors like you. Cold storage. Juicy joints straight from the ice.” (Orwell 1935 : 213)

My work reflects Wimuttikosol’s approach, scrutinising the place of the British woman in the colonial society of Burma with objectivity and nuance. The effect on them of the patriarchy, even allowing for the possibility of racist/colonialist ideas of their own, can

clearly be seen, albeit not with the author's intent, in the character of Elizabeth, as I demonstrate in more detail later.

Tropes in the colonial literature of the early twentieth century

The myth of the destructive female

As Margaret Strobel (1991) points out at the beginning of *European Women and the Second British Empire*, European women are neglected in many of the scholarly histories of the European empires of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. If they are mentioned, it is frequently with reference to their supposed negative contribution to the disintegration of the latterly pliant relationship between rulers and ruled. Typical is this statement in the *The Nabobs* by Percival Spear (1963: 156):

> … as women went out in large numbers, they brought with them their insular whims and prejudices, which no official contact with Indians or iron compulsion of loneliness ever tempted them to abandon. [They were] too insular in most cases to interest themselves in the alien culture and life for its own sake.

Indeed, the tightening of social boundaries in the late colonial societies of South and Southeast Asia - frequently attributed to the insularity of the European women - were the result of many complex factors, that this chapter will discuss. However, the memsahibs provided a convenient scapegoat for the men to blame for the demise of the more laissez faire Anglo-Indian society with its comfortably blurred edges of what was considered socially acceptable.

Modern and feminist historians have looked beyond this convenient stereotyping to find that contemporary developments in colonial society, such as the

increase in appropriation of native property and/or labour, the general increase in racial prejudice in the Western moral paradigm, both in the metropole and in the colonies, the attacks on interracial and non-monogamist relationships by both Christian missionaries and civil administrations as well as the increase in the numbers of both sexes within the European community can all be seen to be contributors to the increase in circumscription of colonial society. As Claudia Knapman (1989: 7) explains:

> … to fall back on a gender explanation for the failure of British colonialism obscures the realities of the power relationship between ruler and ruled. It protects the actor from the unforeseen consequences of particular actions and from real accountability. It leaves the Imperial idea itself intact, the men who affected it inviolable and, because the argument is male in origin, it excuses the men of the ultimate responsibility for what is both now both unpopular and assessed as a failure.

Stoler's 'myth of the destructive female' was a potent signifier in the work of Maugham and Orwell and therefore it is worth briefly clarifying it. A dominant factor seems to be the apparent rift between the societies of coloniser and colonised caused it was said, by British women's racially based disapproval of the interracial sexual relations which had existed in the Indian and Southeast Asian colonies for many generations prior to the one under discussion. During the eighteenth and early part of the nineteenth century, these relationships were viewed leniently in British India and Malaya; the administration was ambivalent, taking an attitude of *quieta non movere*. The general official line was that, to maintain their virility and the strong masculine ideal which underpinned the empire, men needed regular access to heterosexual practices. Officially miscegenation was frowned on and it was made clear to colonial

civil servants that overt liaisons with indigenous women would affect their prospects of promotion – unofficially, they were tolerated as long as they were covert and not allowed to upset the status quo. The Crewe Circular of 1909[11] made interracial sexual relationships officially undesirable. However, the notion remained among many male members of the colonial society that 'in the good old days, concubinage had facilitated a better relationship between the ruler and the ruled' (Strobel 1991: 4).

It would be disingenuous to suppose that British women of the 1920s and 1930s would not disapprove of their husbands keeping a local mistress or indeed, having kept one before their arrival, but to single this out as the main cause of a rift between the colonised and the coloniser would seem to be an exaggeration. The tradition of interracial concubinage, far from being a leveler where racial equality was concerned, had always been a manifestation of an unequal relationship between the colonised female and colonising male. The power dynamic is clearly in favour of the male coloniser and can be viewed as a metaphor for the development of the power of the coloniser over the colonised. It is only if this is ignored that it can be viewed as one of equality based on intimacy.

From the mid nineteenth century onwards, the growth of the colonial administration in India – essentially, the creation of the Raj – grew in elaboration and required a larger European ruling population to serve it. This was also reflected in the colonial societies of Burma and Malaya. The unquestioned belief in the innate superiority of the white man and his ability to rule the brown was the most basic and essential tenet of this high imperial era and was reflected in an increasingly complex administrative and social hierarchy. As an adjunct to this, elaborate social rituals

[11] Circular letter to Peers from 10 Sept. 1909 Lord Crewe, re. forthcoming House of Lords ...

developed which maintained the distance between both British and indigenous people and within the ranks of the British society itself. The task of guarding these social boundaries fell to the British women. That the distance between British and indigenous society was one based on the white community's belief in its own superiority cannot be blamed exclusively on the British women. It had been there from the beginning but with the increase in the need to demonstrate British superiority, which happened to coincide temporally with the advent of a critical mass of British women into the society, any problems the colonials perceived to be a result of its apparent manifestation could be conveniently blamed on the women who were themselves subject to the masculine hegemony of the colonial structure.

The 'Angel in the House

From approximately the middle of the nineteenth century, the fruits of industrial wealth started to create an aspirational and stable middle class in the UK. Comfortable domesticity was seen not only as achievable but also as morally desirable and married women in particular were idealised as 'goddesses of domestic virtue' as typified in Coventry Patmore's cloyingly sentimental poem of 1854 'The Angel in the House':

> Her, the most excellent of all,
> The best half of creation's best,
> Its heart to feel, its eye to see,
> Its aim and its epitome.

As embodiments of Milton's famous dictum from *Paradise Lost*, 'He for God alone, she for God in him',[12] these women were, hypothetically, subservient to their husbands or

[12] Milton, J. Book IV, lines 298–9.

male relatives, devoutly Christian, physically frail, non-intellectual and, most importantly, chaste. Sexual intercourse was strictly confined to the married state and was their duty, not their pleasure. Their mission and assigned purpose in life was to run a calm, well ordered home which was a peaceful retreat for her husband, and to be subservient wife and exemplary mother, with the responsibility for setting the high moral tone to which the rest of the family should aspire. With the increase in the numbers of British women moving to the Indian and Southeast Asian colonies, these tenets migrated with them. As noted above, along with their 'sisters' in the metropole, these women were expected to play their part in maintaining what were considered superior British standards made extant in an hierarchical social structure. At her home in Malaya or Burma, although at all times subservient to the wishes and decisions of her husband, it was the wife who was expected to 'set the tone' of the household. Indeed, it was as a 'civilising' influence that she had been allowed to join her husband in the first place!

In the Federated Malay States, the rigid stratifications of the ICS were replicated in miniature both in the civil administration (the Malayan Civil Service) and in the various 'clubs' and 'stations' peopled by the British colonialists that were the locations for many of Maugham's short stories. These exclusive enclaves with their attendant social rituals served to shore up the superior status of the colonial class and to maintain a sense of cultural identity and social stratification within that class. It would also be true to say that much of the work of discriminating between the ruling hegemonic community and the 'native masses', to the detriment of the latter, so essential for the maintenance of the framework of colonialism, fell to British women as 'incorporated wives', to use the term coined by Hilary Callen and Shirley Ardener (1984).

In the metropole the ‘Angel in the House’ created the peaceful, morally impeccable but essentially private oasis to which her lord and master could retreat from the vicissitudes and trials of everyday life. Her colonial equivalent was expected to create the Empire in miniature in her home – smoothly run, amply provided for, peaceful and strictly hierarchical, with the husband as the head of the house – not only for the sake of her family but as a ‘performance’ to impress and instruct not only those within her own sphere. More importantly, this exemplary figure demonstrated the innate superiority of the colonial masters to those ‘others’ to whom she and her like were bringing the so called ‘gift of **Western** civilisation’. Essentially, they were required to maintain the overt moral and social superiority by which the Empire judged itself and stood to be judged.

The ‘Mutiny’ and its effects – the paradigm shifts!

The literary critic and historian, Hilda Gregg (1897:218), writing in *Blackwood’s* magazine said: ‘Of all the great events of this century, as they are reflected in fiction, the Indian Mutiny has taken the firmest hold on the imagination.’ From 1857 to the end of the nineteenth century and for much of the earlier part of the twentieth century, the South Asian imperial mindset was overlaid by a hysterical fear of violence and particularly rape of British women by Asian men, sparked by the First War of Indian Independence, then called the Indian Mutiny and, in particular an event which became known as the Bibighar Massacre. This took place when, during the siege of Cawnpore (Kanpur), 120 European women and children were murdered by rebel Sepoy troops and their remains thrown down a well.

The uprising in fact started earlier in 1857 with isolated problems in Dum-Dum, Barrackpore and Ambala, and continued well into 1858 when it was finally and viciously suppressed. It was this particular event at Cawnpore that caught the public imagination both metropolitan and Anglo-Indian as is reflected in the huge number of novels, journals, histories, poems and plays that took the Mutiny as their theme. Of all of these, Patrick Brantlinger (1988) considers George Trevelyan's novel *Cawnpore* published in 1865 to be the most important and influential as it concentrates almost solely on this event.

As Jenny Sharpe (1993) explains, although numbers of sexually motivated attacks against white women were, in fact, small during the uprising, they ignited a genre of 'Mutiny' literature full of so-called eyewitness accounts of sepoy atrocities perpetrated by Orientalist stereotypes of Asiatic licentiousness and depravity, thus allowing Anglo-Indian literature to find its mythic brown-skinned rapist. Examples of this genre can be found in the alarmingly vivid rape scenes in James Grant's *First Love and Last Love* (1869) and the Herculean struggles of the heroine to avoid the sexual advances of the native prince in G.A. Henty's *Rujub the Juggler* (1893). Even Paul Scott, in his *Raj Quartet* (1966–1975), set in the last days of the British in India, chooses to name the location where the English girl, Daphne Manners, is gang raped, the Bibighar Gardens, and over a hundred years later, the name was still a potent signifier.

Sharpe (1993) contends that the belief in the increasing incidence of rape of white women by Indian men in the Anglo-Indian fiction of the period post-mutiny, although not based on historical reality, serves as a metaphor for the violence perpetrated against the European community in 1857, which was certainly without comparison. It was, for instance, the first large scale anti-colonial rebellion in the Asian

colonies where European families were massacred. She argues that ‘a crisis in British authority (was) managed through the circulation of violated bodies of English women as a sign for the violence of colonialism. In doing so, I see English womanhood emerge as an important cultural signifier for articulating a colonial hierarchy of race’ (Sharpe 1993: 6). The amalgamation of these three cultural tropes, the myth of the destructive female, the notion of the angel in the home, and the hysteria engendered by the ‘Mutiny’, dictated the theme of much late nineteenth century colonial fiction, that of the feminine symbol of purity and morality needing to be protected from the proverbial ‘fate worse than death’ by the lion-hearted British male.

The rise of eugenics

Overlaid on this cultural paradigm came the growing popularity of the so-called ‘science’ of eugenics with its emphasis on the qualitative hierarchies and categorisations so essential to the Imperial system. However, Eurocentric colonial ideology that is predicated on white supremacy always had a fraught and ambivalent relationship with miscegenation. Talking about how European women were essential to the colonial enterprise and in the establishment and maintenance of racial boundaries, Stoler (1989) points out that their positioning within imperial politics was powerfully reinforced at the turn of the century by a metropolitan bourgeois discourse (and an eminently anthropological one), intensely concerned with notions of ‘degeneracy’. These theories became the foundation for the increasingly segregated and hierarchical colonial society that developed in the closing decades of the nineteenth century and the opening decades of the twentieth century. (Stoler 1989 ; 645) This society was racist in nature but this cannot be blamed solely on the apparently innate prejudices of British women. Firstly, the assumption of British

superiority and indigenous inferiority was present from the start of modern colonialism; in fact, it was so taken for granted that it had never been subject to debate or explanation. By the high colonial period of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century it was a Western a priori – albeit, as we know now, a vicious and false one.

However, as far as the Asian colonies were concerned, it was the Mutiny that caused the paradigm shift because from that point on, the colonial administration started to analyse any hint of native rebellion in terms of race, with the worst so-called 'characteristics' of the subject race being brought to the fore as a reason for stringent punishment and control, and an increasingly rigid set of racially based social parameters. As with the myth of the destructive female, the male, white colonial rulers claimed that their actions were necessary to protect their womenfolk and to uphold the values of the Raj, again 'swerving' the responsibility and placing it on the shoulders of the women.

I would contend that the women were no more racially prejudiced than their husbands; in fact, as later chapters will show, in some cases considerably less so. However, they were equally subject to the post-1857 racial irrationality which, as far as fiction was concerned, portrayed them as being in almost constant danger of the 'fate worse than death' from the indigenous men of the society which hugely outnumbered them. The effect of the Mutiny cannot be overplayed in the colonial mindset with which this thesis is concerned.

Conclusion

Philip Holden (1996), discusses the dichotomous nature of the role of the 'mem' in the life of the Malayan colony. On the one hand, her purpose as defined by the arbitrarily

masculine mores of that society is to serve as representative of the home culture and its moral standards. (Callan and Ardener 1984) on the other hand, by attempting to maintain these standards the white woman becomes the ‘enforcer and the excuse for racial separation. Conflicts in colonial discourse over questions of racial separation and sexual continence are thus displaced from the body of the male colonist onto that of the female’ (Holden 1996: 15) Orwell in *Burmese Days* clearly places the responsibility for the suicide of his anti-hero Flory onto Elizabeth Lackersteen, whose spiteful and thoughtless rejection of him proves to be the final straw. In Maugham’s Malayan fiction this trope is expressed through framing narratives in which female characters are often seen as shallow and destructive while male characters, in spite of the fact that they may have been portrayed as the victims of the manipulative powers of the female protagonist, re-inscribe the story so that it is they who are portrayed as the final arbitrators, ensuring that ruling passions are sublimated and the status quo is maintained at all costs.

In this chapter, I have analysed and discussed the influences whether they be social, political, historical or/and stylistic on the authors in questions, in order to lay the foundation for the next one, in which the works in question will be evaluated through the lenses provided here.

Chapter 3 – British women in Orwell and Maugham's colonial fiction

When Somerset Maugham decided to include his short story 'The Letter' in *The Casuarina Tree* collection, published in 1922 he presumably did not realise that by taking the tale allegedly told to him in Singapore by the lawyer Mr E.A.S. Wagner, of a young British woman tried for and convicted of the murder of her lover in Kuala Lumpur in the years immediately preceding the First World War, he was creating a literary leitmotif that would continue until the present day and that would colour the image of the colonial wife in the public imagination. This chapter will explain how my archival research has revealed that the pejorative view painted by Maugham was far from the truth. Rather than being a conniving, premeditative murderer, Ethel Proudlock was a victim of the coercive control of her husband and father. I use her case to focus on the difference between the fictional view and the actual lived experience of British women in Malaya in the colonial era.

Similarly, my analysis of the entirely fictional character of Elizabeth Lackersteen in *Burmese Days* will demonstrate how Orwell incorporates his misogyny into his critique of Imperialism. Elizabeth was never going to be a sympathetic character but, in focusing only on her apparent ingrained lack of compassion, personal ambition and rapidly developing acceptance of the petty and racist mores of the claustrophobic colonial community of Kyauktada, Orwell deliberately creates a two-dimensional caricature. My research into the lives of women in Burma who would, in actuality, have been Elizabeth's contemporaries, demonstrates far more rounded and nuanced characters; that Orwell chose to write Elizabeth as he did is a function of his own mysogyny.

Maugham's short story, 'The Letter'

Maugham (1926 p 311) initially describes the central character of 'The Letter', Leslie Crosbie, as:

> … in her early thirties, a fragile creature, neither short nor tall and graceful rather than pretty. Her wrists and ankles were very delicate, but she was extremely thin, and you could see the bones of her hands through the white skin and the veins were large and blue. Her face was colourless, slightly sallow and her lips were pale. She was a quiet, pleasant woman – suffering from a certain shyness. With people she knew, she was, in her quiet way, charming.

The short story begins in the offices of Mr Joyce, a Singapore lawyer. Very early in the text Joyce remarks, in agreement with Robert Crosbie's admiration for his wife's composure: 'Yes, I've been very much struck by her self-control. I should never have guessed she was cap on a conversation' where Crosbie himself, because of anxiety and stress (and, Maugham implies, because he really isn't very bright), is in danger of losing his own self-control. Immediately, therefore, the dichotomy is created between this apparently physically frail, socially diffident creature in need of male protection, who none the less, is calmer under pressure and displays more intelligence than her husband and protector. During her spell in custody before she would be tried for murder, instead of going to pieces, in the way the men in the story rather expect, Leslie passes the time reading, resting, exercising when she is allowed, and working at her lace making. Visitors always find her simply but smartly dressed, well coiffed and manicured, and ready to receive them with much the same courtesy as she would have done in her own drawing room. She is even able to make little jokes about the

situation; under the most extreme of conditions, she is seen to maintain the ultimate virtue of the colonial wife in that she keeps up appearances.

Leslie's version of the events of the night of the murder when, she attests, Hammond tried to rape her and she shot him in self-defence is one from which she never deviates either in the Magistrates' Court or in the Supreme Court and is repeated by Maugham's narrator as follows:

> There was a revolver on the desk. She was not a nervous woman, but Robert was to be away for the night, and she had meant to take it into her room when she went to bed. That was why it happened to be there. She was frantic with terror now. She did not know what she was doing. She heard a report. She saw Hammond stagger. He gave a cry. He said something. She didn't know what. He lurched out of the room onto the veranda. She was in a frenzy now, she was beside herself. She followed him out, yes, that was it, she must have followed him out, though she remembered nothing of it, she followed, firing automatically shot after shot, till the six chambers were empty. Hammond fell onto the floor of the veranda. He crumbled into a bloody heap (Maugham 1926: 315).

For the modern reader, the comparison between the woman who becomes so hysterically frenzied when her honour is threatened that she not only shoots her attacker twice in quick succession but subsequently cannot remember emptying the remaining four bullets into him and the cool, calm woman in the dock who sticks rigidly to her story under cross examination in two courts appears as something of a contradiction. However, to Maugham's contemporary audience, her extreme reaction to what she purports to have been a threat of rape or the 'fate worse than death',as shown in the analysis of contemporary literary tropes in the previous chapter, would have been typical of the ultimate fear of the subjugated women in this era of male

domination and is entirely understandable, as is her belief that her subsequent actions will be regarded by her peers as an act of self-defence and that she will be acquitted, thus explaining her sangfroid in the dock. In fact, later in the chapter, I will show how this contemporary belief in rape as the ultimate ignominy for women is used by those manipulating the unfortunate Mrs Proudlock, and the real reasons for this apparent dichotomy will be discussed where new post-trial evidence will be examined.

The subsequent production in court of the letter which proves Leslie's tale to be false still does not shake her resolve and she initially remains in command of the situation. Even when her lawyer informs her that a letter in her handwriting to Geoff Hammond, the victim, has come to light, she maintains her sangfroid. However, on reading the letter which is clearly not merely the social communication she first claims it to be, she changes dramatically:

> … her colourless face grew dreadful to look at. It turned green. The flesh seemed on a sudden to fall away and her skin was slightly stretched over the bones. Her lips receded, showing her teeth, so that she had the appearance of making a grimace. She stared at Joyce [her lawyer) with eyes that started from their sockets. He was looking now at a gibbering death's head (Maugham 1926: 327).

In crafting this description of Leslie finally faced with her guilt, Maugham creates the analogy of the white woman in the colonies as saint turned monster which has influenced the mindset of both his and modern contemporaries.

From this point on, Leslie reveals herself in what Maugham would have us believe was her true light. She first plays to Joyce's innate chivalry by appearing to be

on the verge of nervous collapse yet within a few moments she has collected herself and spins a story that she had wanted Hammond to visit her when her husband was absent because she was planning to buy Robert a gun as a surprise for his birthday and needed Hammond to help her with the purchase. When Joyce reminds her that the fact that she lied under oath (she had sworn she had no communication with Hammond in the weeks before the incident) would put the rest of her testimony in question were the letter to be produced in court, she again – and possibly genuinely – collapses, but on being revived immediately plays on Joyce's sense of colonial masculine solidarity by reminding him how much her husband, Robert Crosbie, would suffer if all this was revealed in court. The letter is being held by Hammond's Chinese mistress, but Leslie is sure that her husband would pay for it, even if it ruined him, because he loves her. However, she begs Joyce not to let him read its contents, saying 'Robert is an old friend of yours. I'm not asking you to do anything for me, I'm asking you to save a rather simple, kind man who never did you any harm from all the pain that's possible'. Thus, Maugham has developed the 'fragile creature' from the beginning of his story into a devious and calculating woman who, by mendacity and manipulation, persuades her husband to ruin himself and her lawyer to compromise his professional ethics to literally, save her own neck.

However, it is only in the final pages of 'The Letter' that Maugham reveals the true duplicitousness of the character he has created. Leslie is acquitted of the murder of Hammond but, during the ensuing celebrations, her husband reveals to her that he knows of her treachery. He leaves to return to their plantation and in a final conversation with Joyce, Leslie openly admits that she and Hammond had been lovers 'for years' and that she had shot him through jealousy because he had tired of her and was on the verge of abandoning their relationship in favour of his longstanding

Chinese mistress. The charade she has played so well of the vulnerable wife defending her honour at any cost falls away to reveal the vengeful woman scorned like whom Hell hath no fury and who is capable of cold-blooded murder:

> … I was beside myself. I saw red. I seized the revolver and I fired. He gave a cry and I saw I'd hit him. He staggered and rushed for the veranda. I ran after him and fired again. He fell and then I stood over him and I fired and fired until the revolver went click, click, and I knew then there were no more cartridges.
>
> At last, she stopped, panting. Her face was no longer human, it was distorted with cruelty, with rage and pain. You would never have thought that this quiet, refined woman was capable of such fiendish passion. Joyce took a step backwards. He was absolutely aghast at the sight of her. It was not a face, it was a gibbering, hideous mask. … (Maugham 1926 : 337)

Joyce's action of stepping back would seem to embody the derogatory view of his sex and class towards their womenfolk as Leslie's actions seem to confirm to him that you cannot trust 'quiet, refined women' lest they turn into murdering termagants who bring down their honourable but naive husbands

'The Letter' has proved to be a robust piece of fiction, spawning three films, an oft produced stage play and several television versions, the latest being in 2007. Without exception, all the dramatised versions stay faithful to Maugham's original short story, thus underpinning the portrayal of Ethel Proudlock in the character of Leslie Crosbie as a vengeful, cold hearted, immoral murderess; an image which helped create the public's negative image of the colonial wife.

The story behind 'The Letter'

Following the publication of ‘The Letter’, the case on which it was based, which was the murder of William Steward by Ethel Proudlock in Kuala Lumpur in 1912, did not appear again in literary form until 1999, when Eric Lawlor’s *Murder on the Verandah – love and betrayal in British Malaya* was published. Lawlor, a journalist, and travel writer, was born in Dublin in 1946 and educated there but spent the bulk of his professional life working for the *Houston Chronicle* in the USA, where he died in 2022. *Murder on the Verandah* contains an account of the Proudlock trial which is apparently the result of archival research but, as Lawlor cites no sources, this is difficult to confirm. However, despite the title, the greater part of the book is devoted to a deprecatory overview of British colonial society in Malaya during and immediately after the year when the crime took place. Again, without specific citations, Lawler makes use of memoirs and published recollections from contemporary members of Malayan expatriate society such as George Bilainkin – the editor of Penang’s English newspaper the *Straits Echo* in the 1920s, Henri Fauconnier the French novelist and Prix de Goncourt winner who had been a successful rubber planter in Selangor, Bruce Lockhart, a British diplomat and spymaster who, in the early years of the twentieth century, had started a rubber plantation in Negri Sembilan (and had seduced the ward of Dato’ Klana, the chief of Sungei Ujong), and Richard Winstedt, the famous scholar and administrator of colonial Malaya, to inform his own derogatory critique.

Lawlor (1999:19) describes Ethel Proudlock as ‘a pretty, blonde haired woman’ who was ‘something of a clothes horse' (ibid.: 29); a woman who, ‘at pains to impress her new lover, was spending more and more time – and more and more of her husband’s money – in John Little’s hat department’ (ibid.: 81). Without citing specific evidence to support his theory, Lawlor is convinced of Ethel Proudlock’s infidelity, stating ‘[i]n April 1910, Mrs Proudlock was feeling better than she had in years because

she was in the throes of a passionate affair with William Steward' (ibid.: 80). Regarding her motives for starting the affair, Lawlor is less specific but generally seems to attribute her falsity to a combination of boredom and opportunity (her husband had been away for some weeks on a trip to Hong Kong which is when, according to Lawlor, the affair started). His view of colonial wives in Malaya in general as 'growing daily more bored, daily more disenchanted, they created misery, not just for themselves but for everyone around them' (ibid.: 162), would suggest that he felt Ethel was not unusual in her apparent moral laxity. However, except for some unattributed quotations from the trial he appears to neither seek for nor to give voice to Ethel herself and her reasons for doing what she did, attributing it, as Maugham did, to jealousy and fear of exposure.

Most recently, Ethel appears in *The House of Doors*, a novel by the Malaysian author Tan Twan Eng (2023). Set mostly in colonial Penang, the plot is based around a supposed visit by Maugham and his partner Gerald Haxton in 1921 to an old lawyer acquaintance, Robert Hamlyn, and his wife, Lesley. During the visit, it is Lesley who, claiming to have been a close friend of Ethel Proudlock, tells Maugham about the Proudlock affair. *The House of Doors* contains a detailed account of the trial, which becomes one of the narrative strands through the novel. Tan's portrait of Ethel is more sympathetic than those of Maugham and Lawlor, intimating that the crime of shooting Steward, to which she had admitted guilt, had been forced upon her by her husband but giving no explanation for Proudlock's reasons. However, the events surrounding the Proudlock trial are a minor thread in the narrative and more important to the story line is Lesley's connection with Dr Sun Yat Sen during his time in Penang in 1910 and her subsequent affair with one of his followers. In *The House of Doors*, Tan's

investment in the lives and affairs of British women in colonial Malaya demonstrates a continuing, more daringly interracial and political view of these women.

When Maugham chose to retell the story of Ethel Proudlock's crime in 'The Letter', as a professional writer, he ensured that he was not laying himself open to charges of libel by altering names, places, and dates. He also significantly changed the narrative by firstly inserting the eponymous letter, the contents of which damn Lesley, and secondly by having her acquitted and released back into the welcoming society of the Singapore planters. In Ethel Proudlock's case, in contrast, there was no letter and she never strayed from proclaiming herself innocent of adultery with William Proudlock, yet she was condemned to death for his murder. Although pardoned by the Sultan of Selangor, the conviction handed down by the colonial justice system was never revoked and the Sultan's civil pardon was given only on the agreement that she would leave Malaya never to return.

Ethel Proudlock and the trial

While every fictional iteration of the Ethel Proudlock story depicts her as a woman who had cheated on her husband with William Steward, her infidelity caused by boredom or/and her own inability to resist temptation, the court papers and newspaper reports relevant to the trial at the National Archives reveal Ethel Proudlock as a very different character. Moreover, her experience of colonial justice was far from what has been depicted in fiction. It is my contention that this evidence strongly suggests that Ethel was essentially 'blackmailed' by her father and husband into killing William Steward.

Unlike her fictional counterpart who is described as 'in her thirties', Ethel was only twenty-three in 1911 and had been married for almost exactly four years. She

was the daughter of Robert Charter, a prominent citizen of Kuala Lumpur who worked for the Public Works Department but also ran the volunteer Fire Brigade and was an amateur horticulturalist. Ethel was almost certainly his daughter by a former mistress as her mother is not recorded on her birth certificate. She was not close to Charter's wife and his other children, although she had been brought up in his house. It has been suggested that she may have been Eurasian but there is nothing in her records to prove this except the fact that her mother's name is left blank on her birth certificate. There would appear to be no extant photographs of her although there is one of her husband at the Batu Caves near Kuala Lumpur with a woman who is possibly Ethel.

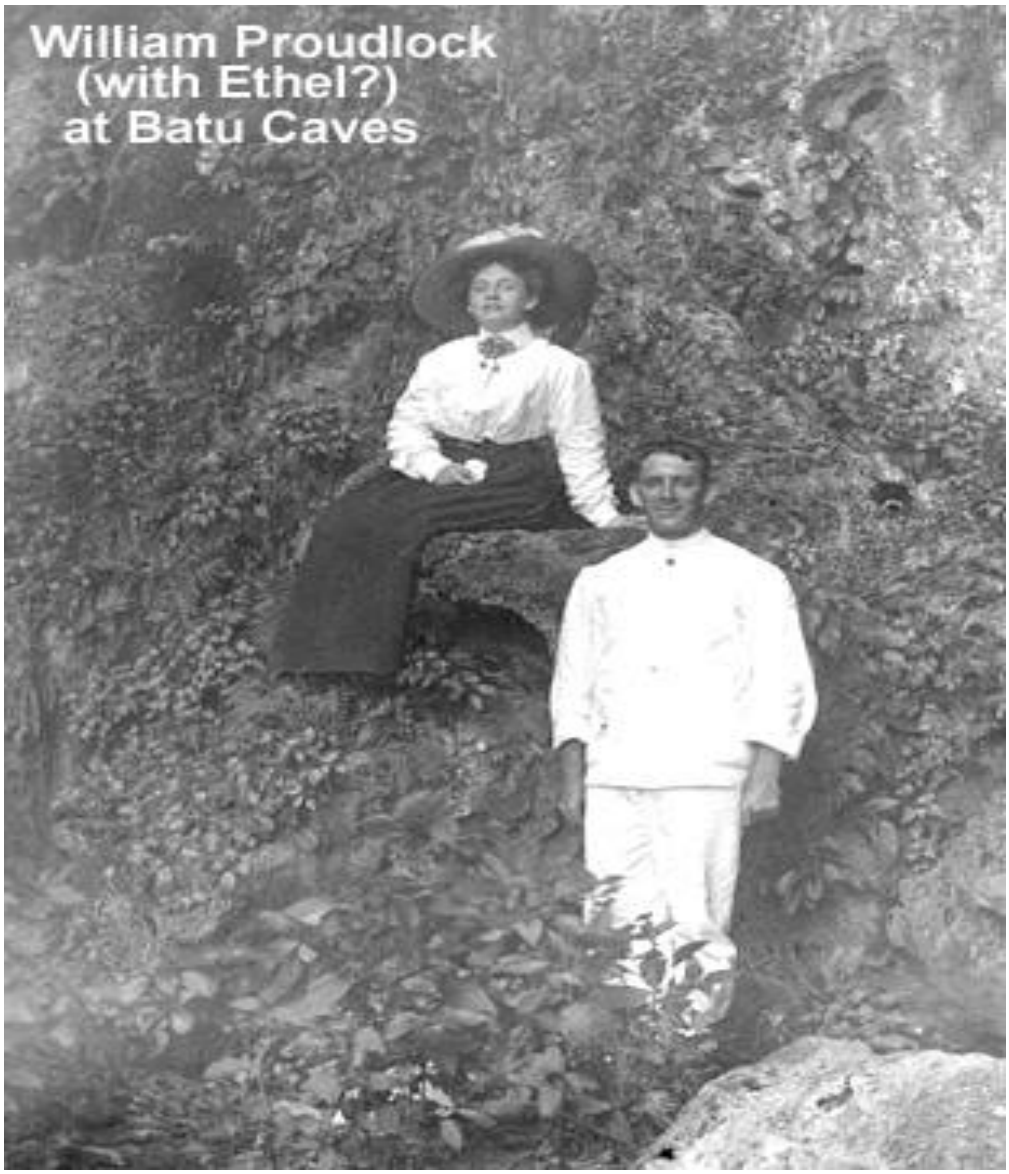


Figure 1. William Proudlock with Ethel (?) at Batu Caves, Selangor, Malaya. Source: Chung Chee Min (2001), 'The Proudlock Saga', Kuala Lumpur: Victoria Institution. <http://viweb.school/proudlock.htm>

Ethel, if indeed this is she, is seated behind her husband who is smiling straight into the camera while she focuses on something in the near distance. She has dark hair and regular features and is in every way unremarkable. Her husband's statements and the medical reports which formed part of the documentation from the trial suggest she was severely anaemic and suffered from crippling headaches and was also plagued with unpleasant gynaecological problems, serious enough for surgery to have been suggested. She and Proudlock had one daughter, Dorothy, who was born in England and who may have been conc eived before their marriage. Rather than living as a lonely, bored wife of a planter, Ethel lived in metropolitan Kuala Lumpur where her husband was assistant headmaster at the Victoria Institution, one of its most prestigious schools, and where they both took an active part in the musical and church societies, although Ethel's poor health often precluded her from attending. They were both members of the local Rifle Club and Ethel was considered an excellent shot – a fact which may well have had some bearing on the subsequent events. To all intents and purposes, despite a somewhat suspect background as far as the colonial society was concerned, Ethel appeared to have all the qualities required of a good, respectable colonial wife.

Like Leslie, in court, Ethel Proudlock never deviated from her account of the occurrences on the evening of 23 April 1911and always contended that, after she had fired the first shot, she could remember nothing until she was back in the house and Steward was dead. Although Judge Sercombe-Smith was impressed with her consistency, this unwavering story contributed to her downfall. Because she had, from

the start, confessed to killing Steward in self-defence, her lawyers had to prove that at the time of the shooting, she acted as an 'exercise of good faith in the right or private defence of a person' or 'through the deprivation of power of self-control by grave and sudden provocation' (Yeo 1992: 616). The fact that there was an interval between the first two shots being fired which was long enough for Steward to stagger from the house and collapse on the lawn before four more shots were fired into his upper body discounted the first plea and seriously compromised the second. Several times, during the trial, Ethel broke down and sobbed and when the two Assessors[13] pronounced her guilty without even leaving the court to consider and Sercombe-Smith asked her whether she had anything to say in mitigation of the sentence he would be obliged to pass, she remained silent. When the death sentence was pronounced, not surprisingly, she broke down entirely and had to be helped from the court in a state of collapse.

In Maugham's fictional account, Leslie is found innocent and therefore the author never confronts how his character might have behaved had her fictional trial mirrored Ethel's reality through to the verdict. Rather than a celebration cocktail party to which the fictional Leslie is treated, Ethel was immediately transferred back to Pudu gaol to the condemned cells where she would have been forced to wear prison clothes and eat a prison diet. The lawyers lodged an appeal immediately but four weeks after this, Ethel, against the advice of her lawyers, withdrew it, throwing herself totally on the mercy of the Sultan of Selangor. According to her letter to the Sultan's advisor:

[13] There was no jury system in the Kuala Lumpur courts, even for murder. Instead, two 'upstanding citizens' – needless to say, men – were appointed Assessors and it was up to them to declare a verdict.

> The suspense is simply awful. I am as you are probably aware, in a condemned cell, each day and night the only time I am not locked up is when the jailer takes me out for exercise. The continual supervision has got on my nerves to the extent that I feel that another month of it would deprive me of my reason. … I am told that various petitions have been sent to his Highness the Sultan asking that I may be pardoned. I hope that he may be able to take pity on my sufferings.[14]

With the legal appeal withdrawn, the Sultan pardoned Ethel, on the proviso that she left Malaya. In Maugham's account, because Leslie is found innocent in the civil court, the question of an appeal to the Sultan never appears. In line with Maugham's colonial mindset, Imperial justice is seen to serve whereas in reality, it was 'native' authority that finally saved Ethel Proudlock.

New evidence

The court papers from the trial, now lodged in the National Archives at Kew, show Ethel, though undoubtedly guilty of the shooting and killing of William Steward, to be a pathetic figure sticking doggedly to her story despite occasional lapses into despair and even when it is not necessarily in her interest to do so. There may have been reasons for that. There is one small file marked 'Secret' in the Proudlock trial archives that has apparently been ignored by historians, containing correspondence between Sir Arthur Henderson Young, the then High Commissioner of the Federated Malay States, and his masters in London regarding some evidence that had been brought to his notice post-trial by Mr Pooley, one of Ethel's defence lawyers. This letter alleges that rather than being an impulsive reaction to a threat to her virtue, Ethel's crime was

[14] National Archives, FCO 141/16210

premeditated.[15] Pooley claimed to have evidence that proved the following: Ethel Proudlock was Robert Charter's illegitimate daughter by his sister-in-law and had had a far from happy life in her father's household. During Proudlock's 1909 trip to Hong Kong, Ethel had gone driving alone with Steward and visited his bungalow without any sort of chaperone, although there is no suggestion that anything improper took place. However, it should be remembered that, in the claustrophobic society of colonial Kuala Lumpur, for a married woman to spend time alone with man who was not her husband and to visit him in his home was enough to cause a scandal. On his return to Kuala Lumpur, Proudlock discovered his wife's indiscretions and used that knowledge to blackmail Steward into loaning him money. When Steward demanded repayment and Proudlock could not meet his debt, Proudlock decided Steward must be 'got rid of' (ibid.).

Early in 1911, Proudlock had visited a local lawyer to enquire what the penalty was likely to be for a woman who shot and killed a man who was trying to rape her and, having been told that, on balance, a capital sentence was unlikely, he purchased a revolver (ibid.). At this point he also took his father-in-law, Robert Charter, into his confidence and both men confronted Ethel Proudlock telling her that, if she did not agree to shoot Steward and then claim the shooting was in self-defence as he had tried to rape her, Proudlock would use the evidence of her solo visit to Steward's bungalow to divorce her and she would have to return to her father's house in disgrace, losing contact with her little daughter. Pooley also states that he considers Ethel's 'indiscretion' with Steward was a 'one-off' and that she was a good woman and a good

[15] National Archives, FCO 141/16210

mother. He also considers that Proudlock's motives were entirely monetary and had very little to do with his wife's virtue or lack of it.

Young finishes his letter with the following paragraph:

> I have not been given the facts and the evidence relied upon to support the above conclusions but Mr Rhodes, the Acting Legal Advisor, has been given them and Mr Rhodes, who has read the above, informs me that he is convinced from the facts and evidence given to him by Mr Pooley that the above is a correct statement and that there is no doubt that the crime was murder, premeditated and arranged.[16]

In a subsequent letter on 20 July 1911, from E.L. Brockman, Chief Secretary to the Malay States to Sir Louis Harcourt, Secretary of State for the Colonies, Brockman states that it is currently impossible to make use of the information that has been forwarded to Sir Arthur Young. However, more information may emerge, and proceedings may yet be taken again against Proudlock and Charter. Therefore, the papers should be sent to Scotland Yard and that it may be sensible to keep a watch on Charter's movements as he has accompanied his daughter to England. However, unless Mrs Proudlock is prepared to confess to the conspiracy it would be difficult to proceed.

If one considers the incident and the trial in the light of these additional contentions then several things seem to make sense. Proudlock's visit to an unknown lawyer to check what the likely penalty would be for a woman who shot and killed a man who was attempting to rape her, and his subsequent purchase of a pistol, would

[16] National Archives, FCO 141/16215.

suggest that he was at least considering using Ethel as the agent to rid himself of his creditor but needed to reassure himself that she would not pay with her life if his ruse worked. As already noted, on a practical level, Ethel was known to be a fair shot. If the evidence presented by Pooley post-trial was true, then Proudlock and Charter had used their power over Ethel to force her to commit what could, in theory, be considered a capital crime. However, they were prepared to risk this outcome, assuming, on the lawyer's advice, that it would be judged as action in self-defence. Ethel stuck to the story which had been scripted for her because she did not dare deviate, thus demonstrating her abject fear of the fate that awaited her had she not gone ahead with the shooting, putting all six bullets into Steward to ensure his death. Her lawyers, who were not party to the plot to kill Steward, wanted her to appeal but her 'handlers' (Proudlock and Charter) realised that further evidence might be brought forward, and persuaded her to throw herself on the mercy of the Sultan before this could happen. The Sultan's pardon, therefore, was not a strategy stage-managed by the colonial justice system which, with Ethel's conviction, was faced with the dichotomy of being seen to uphold the supremacy of the law and condone the disgrace of a white woman being executed. Rather, the pardon was the result of the final act of coercive control being exercised over Ethel by her husband and father who had realised the game was almost up for them.

According to these court papers, Ethel Proudlock was a devoted wife and mother but one who was to a great extent, the victim of the bigoted colonial system and who would have rather accepted the death penalty than be thought of as an adulteress. By turning this woman into the vengeful arch-villainess, Leslie Crosbie, who escapes justice having murdered her lover, broken her husband's heart and forced her lawyer to perjure himself, Maugham has created not only the story's anti-

heroine but also an image of the Malayan colonial wife, which, as the popularity of the tale in various forms throughout the decades has shown, has had a considerable effect on the public understanding of British women in Malaya who were his contemporaries. The character of the protagonist Ethel/Leslie has clearly been changed and dramatised from a nervous, quiet, self-effacing woman to a strong, manipulative femme fatale (literally, in Hammond's case). It would be ingenuous to accept that this was entirely a function of disguise, given the similar characterisation of white female characters in Maugham's other stories. Rather it would seem to be symptomatic of what Margaret Strobel termed 'the myth of the destructive female'; a stereotype of the petty, frivolous, ethnocentric and unproductive women who contribute nothing of benefit to the imperial enterprise' (Strobel 1991: 7). By characterising Leslie as he does, and because her story becomes famous through contemporary theatre and film, while Ethel Proudlock's truth is almost entirely forgotten, Maugham is supporting a fallacious view of white women in the Southeast Asian colonies and one which negatively influenced the view of the metropole towards the reality of these women.

It is, of course, impossible to know how much Maugham knew or was told, about the real events of the Proudlock case. However, given that much of his information came from people who would have been in Malaya at the time of the trial and that he is known to have read the newspaper reports, one must conclude that his creation of the 'monstrous' Leslie, was a deliberate act to vilify the character of the anti-heroine/victim. The real Ethel Proudlock left Malaya with her daughter and her father, but after some time in England, emigrated to America and obscurity. Leslie Crosbie, of course, has no history beyond the end of the drama, but Maugham has written her as escaping the stigma Ethel suffered even though Leslie admits to her guilt once the danger has passed. Ethel was a woman who was entirely dependent on

and manipulated by her unscrupulous male relatives to risk sacrificing her life to solve a problem not of her making, even though it would subject her (but importantly not her husband or father) to at best, a scandal and at worst, execution. Leslie, as portrayed by Maugham, is immoral and entirely self-motivated by jealousy. In Maugham's story, it is the woman who is the villain and the men the victims whereas in reality, I contend that the reverse was the case.

Maugham's malign interpretation of the character of colonial women is also clearly seen in his short story 'The Force of Circumstance', in which Maugham portrays a young bride, Doris, who, after a month's acquaintance while he was on leave in England, had accepted and married a man who worked for the Sultan of Sembulu (1926a: 47) and immediately left the UK for the husband's remote station in the sultanate. Initially, Doris is very happy in her isolated new home and, unlike some of Maugham's female characters, finds the Malays and the local flora and fauna interesting. She plays the role expected of her by 'civilising' her husband's house, rearranging the large living room so that 'the room was comfortable. In glass vases were lovely orchids and in great bowls huge masses of flowering shrubs. She felt a great pride in it. It was her house … and she had made it charming' (ibid.) She instigates a domestic ritual of bath times, rest times and sundowners. To all intents and purposes then, Doris is doing exactly what a colonial wife of her era was expected to do.

However, she later discovers her husband, during his ten years of bachelorhood before her arrival, had a native mistress and had sired three children on her. The woman, who is never named, has been sent to live in the local kampong but she is understandably not happy with the situation and 'haunts' the house. When Doris confronts her husband, he tries to minimise the importance of his previous lifestyle: 'I

couldn't expect you to understand. The circumstances out here are peculiar. It's a regular thing. Five men out of six do it.' (iMaugham 1926:117).

After six months of soul-searching, following her discovery of these mixed-race children and her husband's confession of his previous relationship, she finds herself in an involuntary state of disgust, unable to contemplate remaining in the marriage. When her husband attempts to discuss the situation, Doris refuses, saying 'Oh Guy, there's no object in going back over all that. We've said all we had to say about it, and I don't blame you for anything.' (Ibid: 62). When she finally decides she must leave him and go back to England, her sole reason for ending her marriage is a purely visceral, racist one: 'I can't help it. It's stronger than I am. I think of those skinny black arms of her's around you and it fills me with physical nausea. I think of you holding those little black babies in your arms. Oh, it's loathsome. The touch of you is odious to me' (ibid. 70). Doris' words and Maugham's portrayal of her could not be more clearly illustrative of Scawen-Blunt's theory that it was the racism of white women that damaged the colonial situation for their more laissez-faire menfolk. Doris even apologises for her actions: she has 'broken [Guy's] life, but I've broken mine too' (ibid. 72). Rather than taking an accusatory line with her husband for his duplicity and failure to make his pre-marriage situation clear to her, she deprecates her own inability to live with the situation and carry on as before. Thus, Maugham's intention was to demean the behaviour of a white woman in the late colonial period, suggesting it to be essentially racist and in direct contradiction of what was accepted and condoned, if not publicly recognised, in male behaviour and society.

However, given the social situation that existed in Malaya regarding miscegenation at the time of which Maugham writes, it would seem contrary to analyse Doris' behaviour alone as 'racist'. Until she realises that these children are in fact her

husband's, she takes a benevolent and gentle interest in them, viewing them as just one part of this new culture that interests and charms her. However, in her total rejection of them when she discovers the truth, she is surely demonstrating a contrary reaction to the accepted view women were required to take of the situation in which she found herself. She is faced with a complete contradiction having arrived in a colonial society where not only is she part of the superior administrative group but part of what is increasingly identifying itself as the racially superior group and which uses that racial superiority to maintain its power. In her avowal that – not altogether surprisingly – she cannot contemplate the idea of her husband's native mistress and children, I would suggest her apparent 'racism' is merely an example of a memsahib voicing what must never be said – and that is her 'crime'. Her husband never regarded his mistress as his equal and speaks of his children by her in the most derogatory tone, but his behaviour is tolerated by his male counterparts if it is not overt. In writing of Doris as he does, Maugham condemns in her what is tolerated and glossed over in his portrayal of male characters. Furthermore, he belittles the character by portraying her as regretting her inability to live with the situation and perform her duty as a colonial wife which would be to first accept the double standards of this society and then ignore her husband's interracial transgressions, so long as they do not continue or at least are never brought to her notice again.

In his short story 'The Book-Bag' Maugham (1932) presents his readers with two British women, both of whom, in their separate ways, are portrayed as having 'broken the rules' and 'let the side down', thus engendering the censure of the inevitably male narrator and, by extension, his audience. Like many of Maugham's stories, The Book-Bag is a recount told by one senior male member of the colonial hierarchy to another, in an exclusively male, white environment. In this case, the

narrator, Mark Featherstone, the Acting Resident of the fictitious State of Tengarrah relates to the unnamed narrator the tale of Olive Hardy as they relax over stengahs[17] in the Club bar. It transpires that, when Featherstone first arrived in Malaya, he was befriended by a brother and sister, Tim and Olive Hardy, who together ran a remote rubber plantation. From the start of his narrative, although Featherstone describes the Hardys as being 'of one's own class, if you understand what I mean' (Maugham 1935: 20), there is something odd about Olive. He rapidly falls in love with her but hesitates to propose because 'there was something a little mysterious in her. Although she was so simple, so frank and natural, you never quite got over the feeling of an inner kernel of aloofness, as if, deep in her heart she guarded not a secret but a sort of privacy of the soul that not a living person would ever be allowed to know.' (ibid.: 25).

It is worth noting that from the start of the narrative, Maugham plays on the fact that Olive is somehow strange/odd. Of course, the reader realises quickly that this is because she is hiding a very singular secret; that she is in an incestuous affair with her brother Tim. That Maugham emphasises the peculiarity of Olive but never of Tim when presumably both are willing partners in the affair is typical of his mysogyny.

In true British fashion, Featherstone puts this down to her upbringing – she and Tim, her slightly younger brother, were separated when young and Olive was brought up by a rackety mother in Italy while Tim remained at the family estate in Dorset, and they were only reunited after the death of both parents when they were in their teens. When Featherstone finally plucks up the courage to propose, Olive gently but firmly turns him down on the grounds that she could not leave her brother whom, she avows, will never marry. While the modern reader might already be experiencing a sense of

[17] A stengah was a whiskey and soda in colonial Malaya. The term originates from the Malay word 'setengah' meaning 'half' as the drink was half whiskey, half soda.

unease about the relationship between the Hardy siblings, Featherstone, like the good but ingenuous fellow he is, feels unable to tell her that ‘it wasn’t quite the same thing living with a husband and living with a brother. She was normal and healthy. She must want to have babies; it wasn’t reasonable to starve her natural instincts’ (ibid. 26).

Shortly after this, Tim Hardy returns to England ostensibly to oversee the re-letting of his property and to purchase more equipment for the estate. During his absence, Featherstone and Olive’s friendship continues albeit in a kind of stasis which is rudely broken, first by a telegram to say that Tim’s return will be delayed, which, to Featherstone’s mind disproportionately upsets Olive, but finally and cataclysmically by Tim’s letter announcing his marriage. Olive, overwhelmed with distress, briefly agrees to become engaged to Featherstone, insisting they keep the engagement completely secret until Tim returns. However, on the night before the young couple are expected, she breaks the engagement with the unequivocal statement: ‘I can’t marry you. I can’t marry anyone. It was absurd of me to think I could.’ Featherstone recalls he felt unable to reply. ‘I didn’t answer at once. She was in a queer state and I thought it better not to insist’ (ibid.: 36). To his credit he later regrets this rectitude, feeling that, had he pressed her further he might have been able to avoid the tragedy of the following morning when, as the car bearing Tim Hardy and his young bride arrives at the rubber plantation, Olive shoots herself through the head.

The reader has already been introduced to the young bride, Sally Hardy, when she and her husband breakfast with Featherstone following their early morning arrival in the town. Featherstone’s initial impression of Sally is not unkind but patronising in the extreme: ‘an extremely pretty little thing … A little of the chorus girl type, of course, and you [here Fetherstone is addressing the author, his listener) may happen to think that namby-pamby’ (ibid.: 36). However, Maugham spends little time establishing this

‘frank, gay and ingenuous creature’ (ibid.) in the approach to the climax of the story and Olive’s suicide. The next time we meet the unfortunate Sally is when she appears at Featherstone’s house late in the following evening, demanding in tones far from gay or ingenuous that he help her leave the colony as soon as possible, preferably at once. Featherstone’s immediate and automatic response is to tell her she ‘can’t leave Tim like that just now. My dear, you must pull yourself together. I know it’s been awful for you. But think of Tim. If you have any love for him, the least you can do is to try and make him a little less unhappy (ibid: 35). Despite her vehement protestations that she cannot tell Featherstone the reasons for her decision as the circumstances that led to it are too horrible and that she would rather die than see her husband again, Featherstone still doggedly continues to defend Tim and his position in the society, saying ‘It’ll create an awful scandal here. I don’t know what people will say. Have you thought of the effect on Tim?’ (ibid.: 40).

At this point, the fictional narrator asks the question that the reader has been asking for some time, namely, surely Featherstone had realised that the Hardys had been in an incestuous relationship that the young bride had no idea about until it was revealed to her in the most appalling way on her arrival at her new married home. Featherstone finally admits: ‘Yes, I knew alright. It explained everything. Poor Olive. Poor sweet. I suppose it was unreasonable of me, at that moment I only felt a horror of that pretty little fair-haired thing with her terrified eyes. I hated her. I didn’t say anything for a while. Then I told her I’d do as she wished. She didn’t even say thank you. …’ (ibid : 42)

This is another example of Maugham’s collusion with the contemporary colonial trait of refusing to acknowledge anything that is out of step with the social boundaries they have created; in this case, incest. Featherstone admits he had

realised what was happening but still refers to Olive as ‘Poor Olive, poor sweet’, thus exonerating her from her willing breach of what were then two fundamental taboos, because she colluded in ‘playing the game’. However, Sally, who, unlike the Hardy siblings, he considers to be from a lower class, he condemns and even claims to ‘hate’ because she was unwilling to ‘do the decent thing’ and forgive and then ignore her husband’s past.The story finishes rapidly after this. The young wife gets her wish and leaves surreptitiously on the night train for the coast.

The character of Olive Hardy is one of Maugham’s more interesting and complex female characters. However, she is one, who, from the reader’s point of view, is refracted through the lens of Featherstone’s judgement. Ostensibly, both Olive and her brother appear to embody the colonial domestic ideals. She has made their estate house

> … easy and homelike and comfortable. … Olive took great trouble with her garden and it was really topping. I never saw such a display of cannas. … Olive had taught their cook to make all sorts of Italian dishes. It was damned good. It was a change from what one usually got. She was a good hostess: I’m bound to say people enjoyed going there. They often asked people over. They had the gift of making you feel at home (ibid.: 21).

By emphasising how the narrator, the inexperienced newcomer, felt comfortable in this house where in fact one of the fundamental norms was being transgressed, Maugham is allowing Featherstone an excuse for his own failings; indeed he could be seen as one of Stoler’s ‘innocent’ men.

The Hardys took part in the wider social life of the station, frequently playing in tennis tournaments at the Club. In fact, they appear to maintain the social and moral

standards expected of them and yet, we discover, in private they were breaking one of the most basic of the moral taboos. Featherstone naively wonders whether Olive understands the difference between a familial relationship i.e., hers with her brother and a potential married relationship i.e., hers with Featherstone, not realising or refusing to realise that her relationship with Tim has encompassed the two already. When she breaks their engagement the night before Tim's return, very belatedly he does suspect the truth, but he still maintains the colonial absolute of not prying and does not delve further into her reasons, merely maintaining 'she was in a queer[18] state' (ibid.: page no.36). It comes as no surprise to the modern reader that Olive's internal conflict led her to take the extreme action that she did, but Featherstone's insistence in maintaining the façade that she was a model colonial companion, keeping up the standards like everyone else, meant that, following her death, his main concern is that the possible scandal might hurt the reputation of her brother.

As far as the unfortunate young wife, Sally, is concerned, Featherstone's worry is again that by leaving her new husband on the discovery of his incestuous relationship with his sister, she will expose him the adverse judgment of the small colonial society in which he lives. It begs the question that he feels had she been able to stay, accept – or at least publicly rise above – the situation, reputations might have been saved and the suspicions that had clearly been mooted in the community regarding the Hardys' relationship. The motherly Mrs Sergison, on hearing through the servants of Featherstone and Olive's 'secret' engagement, avows 'I'm very glad that Tim's married. And I hope she'll marry you very soon. It was a morbid and unhealthy life that they led up there, those two, they kept far too much to themselves and they

[18] Maugham uses 'queer' in the original meaning i.e. strange or odd.

were far too absorbed in one another' (ibid.:p.33.), ensures it would continue to be swept under the rattan mats. Thus, Maugham, as narrator/author describes the small colonial society in which the Hardys and Featherstone live as one not only capable of turning a blind eye to the breaking of fundamental sexual taboos but one where the role of the wife/woman subservient to her husband/man, running her peaceful comfortable home is of supreme importance as is the 'keeping up of appearances' and the protection of status and reputation.

What I have shown in my analyses of these two further short stories also demonstrates Maugham's ability to portray the horror of the colonial societies towards women who refuse to do what is expected of them in order to bolster the hypocritical boundaries imposed on these societies by masculine authority.

Orwell's contribution to the myth

This concept of the masculine perception of the innate insularity of the memsahib is made clear in Orwell's portrayal of Elizabeth Lackersteen in *Burmese Days*. When taken to a Burmese theatre performance by Flory shortly after her arrival, she evinces her prejudice against the Burmese, by making an early and discourteous exit, complaining she had to rub shoulders with 'all those smelly natives ... She was perfectly certain that that was not how white men behaved' (Orwell 1936 :103). When she discovers that the anti-hero Flory has a Burmese mistress, Ma Hla May, her response is one of physical repugnance: 'the thought that he had been the lover of that grey-faced maniacal creature made her shudder in her bones' (ibid.:260). When asked if she can forgive Flory, she replies, 'What has it got to do with me? I thought it was all very disgusting, but it's not my business.' (ibid : 261)

Her lack of empathy and callous rejection of Flory reflect Orwell's characterisation of Elizabeth as having a relentless reliance on the mores of the racially and socially stratified society in which she must make her way and which, Orwell ensures his readers know, in the final pages of the novel, has undoubtedly contributed to Flory's decision to take his own life. Like Maugham, Orwell demonstrates the supposed pernicious effect of the racist European woman on the male members of the colonial society of which they become part. I began this thesis with Orwell's final judgement on Elizabeth, which is consummately damning in that it summarises the author's all-encompassing contempt for the memsahibs of Burma:

> Her servants live in terror of her, though she speaks no Burmese. She has an exhaustive knowledge of the Civil List, always gives charming dinner parties and knows how to put the wives of subordinate officials in their places – in short she fills with complete success the position for which Nature had designed for her from the first, that of a burra (great) memsahib (Orwell 1936: 272).

Whether or not Orwell based the character of Elizabeth on any woman or a composite of women in the colonial Burmese society within which he mixed during his years in the Burma Police (1922–1927) is impossible to say. However, although he has created an interesting 'back story' for her, the fact that he never balances Elizabeth's poor behaviour against the events that, in his narrative, precede her life in Burma, is indicative to me of his own misogyny and his contempt for British women in the colonial setting in general. Had he done so, the character, would still, by rejecting the unfortunate Flory, have been part of his downfall, but Orwell would have provided a more nuanced view of women who went to the Southeast Asian colonies in search

of finding a husband and therefore one that was closer to the varying realities of the women themselves.

To modern eyes, the concept of travelling to the other side of the world with the specific aim of finding a husband indicates a general dependency on and acceptance of the established patriarchy. However, for women in the same or a similar situation as the one Orwell has created in Elizabeth, it provided one of a very few practical solutions available to them. Elizabeth Lackersteen is twenty-two when we first meet her and has come to Kyauktada (Kathar – a railhead town on the Ayerwaddy, north of Mandalay, where Orwell/Blair was stationed and where he set *Burmese Days*) to stay with her uncle, Ted Lackersteen, and his wife. Lackersteen is a Forestry Officer and a drunk, and his wife a small minded, easily frightened gossip.

Elizabeth's father had been a tea broker and an unsuccessful businessman. During a short spell of prosperity at the end of the First World War, Elizabeth was sent to an expensive boarding school where she made rich friends and developed her taste for the finer things of life. 1919 saw the fortune disappear and Mr Lackersteen perish during the influenza outbreak. Elizabeth and her mother, whom Orwell paints as a silly, flighty woman with delusions of intellectualism and who he describes as 'one of those people who go to pieces when deprived of servants' (ibid.: 78) were left with £150 per annum to live on, and consequently, moved from London to the supposedly cheaper Paris. Mrs Lackersteen, who dabbled in art, took a studio in Montparnasse where she proved incapable of managing her small budget and for several months, she and her daughter went hungry. As soon as she was considered old enough, Elizabeth took a post as an English tutor for the children of a rich Parisian banker who lived the other side who of the city from Montparnasse and so Elizabeth had to take a cheap, run-down rented room, returning occasionally to visit her mother. The banker made

improper advances to her, but she had no option but to remain in the job as her mother is living in poverty-stricken squalor and cannot afford to feed her.

Hardly surprisingly, given her experiences since she had arrived in Paris, Elizabeth makes no friends, hates anything classed by her mother's Bohemian acquaintances as 'intellectual' and finds her only pleasure in spending free afternoons in the American Library reading fashion and society magazines. After two years in Paris, Mrs Lackersteen dies, leaving her only child with less than £100. Thus, when Elizabeth receives an invitation to join her uncle and aunt in Burma, she had little choice but to accept.

Unfortunately for her, although she loves the 'romance' of the journey, Burma itself and Kayauktada does not live up to her mental picture of the life of British colonials in the tropics which, informed by the glamourous fiction of Michael Arlen and William J Locke (contemporary writers of light fiction for whom Orwell clearly has no time) and her magazine reading habit, she had assumed to be one of luxury and indulgence.

Things do not start well for her. Her Aunt makes it very clear from the outset that she is expected to marry as soon as possible and be taken off their hands, while her uncle on first meeting her: 'gave a half whistle, (and) exclaimed "Well, I'll be damned!" and then seized Elizabeth and kissed her, more warmly than he need have done, she thought*.'* (ibid.: 83).

This presages his behaviour sometime later in the novel when, on the pretext of asking her how a day's shooting went, he 'appeared in her room and began pinching her leg in a way that simply could not be misunderstood. This was her first introduction to the fact that some men are capable of making love to their nieces' (ibid.: 158)

Penniless, she has spent what little she had to equip herself to come 8,000 miles to what she had thought to be her new home and she realises that 'It would be terrible if, after two weeks, her uncle's house was made uninhabitable for her' (ibid.).

Although Orwell portrays Elizabeth within the narrative of *Burmese Days* as both insensitive and intolerant, he fails to credit any of her behaviour to what is a desperate situation he, as author, has created for a young woman. Should she not marry, then she is at the mercy of a predatory incestuous male. Her childhood and adolescence were clearly unstable, her time in Paris taught her to loath 'foreigners' and Burma has proved a disappointment, so in response to this and the incestuous advances of her uncle, and having failed to land the arrogant but much more eligible Lieutenant Verrall, in sheer desperation she convinces herself to accept Flory.

However, when she discovers he has not only had a Burmese mistress but one who is possibly prepared to make a scandal in the claustrophobic society from which, if she marries him, Elizabeth has no escape, she rejects him and pragmatically ends up as the wife of the much older but totally secure and respectable District Commissioner, Mr Macgregor. Thus the reader cannot but despise Elizabeth because Orwell, due to his own misogynistic bias, which does not allow him to attribute any of her unpleasant and ruthless behaviour even partly to be the result of her unfortunate life before and immediately upon her arrival in Kayauktada, has written her as a thoroughly unlikeable character.

Some conclusions

The main objective of this chapter is to demonstrate in detail, how both Maugham and Orwell, in their fictional portrayals of British women in the colonies of Malaya and

Burma, contributed to the negative image of the reality of their lived experience that this research seeks to question. In Leslie Crosby, the anti-heroine of 'The Letter', Maugham has created a simulacrum of Ethel Proudlock, the unfortunate Kuala Lumpur schoolmaster's wife, on whom he based her. Leslie is the epitome of the clever, manipulative, and immoral woman who purposedly destroys the apparently straightforward, honourable men of the colonial society. However, newly discovered archival material would suggest that, not only was Ethel Proudlock neither manipulative nor immoral but that she was in fact the manipulated victim of immoral and domineering men and was a long way from deserving the opprobrium her dramatic persona invites.

Three more of Maugham's female British characters are also examined and each, in their different ways, are demonstrated to personify negative traits inherent on the contemporary misogynistic view of the British women's deleterious effect on colonial society. Doris in 'Force of Circumstance' displays the racism the women were accused of intensifying by refusing to accept and subsequently overlook the fact that her husband has two children and an ex-mistress living in the nearby kampong while Olive, in 'The Book-Bag' quietly breaks two of the fundamental taboos by committing incest with her brother and then suicide, when the same brother brings a young wife into their home. Sally, the young wife in question, when faced with the horrifying truth of her husband's former life almost before she has crossed the threshold of her new married home, is then censured for wanting to leave rather than stay and 'do the decent thing' by ignoring what has happened. The two wives who, for different reasons, find it impossible to 'turn a blind eye' to their husbands' former conduct are condemned by the male storyteller for refusing to ignore the past and take up their roles as the ideal supportive colonial wives while the incestuous Olive is viewed

condescendingly as a ‘poor sweet’ who, had she only agreed to accept the love of a good man, would have been able to put her past behind her.

Orwell’s view of British women in Burma is epitomised in the character of Elizabeth Lackersteen, whose fate is marriage to a Deputy Commissioner, older than herself, after which she becomes, in the author’s eyes, a typical ‘burra’ mem whose servants are scared of her, who speaks no Burmese and who has a labyrinthine knowledge of the social hierarchy of the colonial society in which she lives. In a later chapter of this work, accounts drawn from primary sources, of the lives of women who, had she not been fictional, would have been Elizabeth’s contemporaries in Burma, demonstrate that these were not necessarily the attributes of so-called ‘burra memsahibs’ but were rather born of Orwell’s blatant bigotry and highly critical view of the Empire which, as a colonial policeman, he had served.

In this chapter, I have shown, through detailed analysis and a close reading of the relevant texts, how Maugham and Orwell’s’ female characters demonstrate their authors’ innate misogyny, albeit in Orwell’s case as part of a much wider anti-imperialist strategy and in Maugham’s, as a method to tap into the contemporary zeitgeist in order to sell his work but also as a reflection of his own sexual ambivalence. In Chapters 4, 5 and 6, I use my research which has uncovered the lived reality of these women to demonstrate how they have been misrepresented.

Chapter 4 – 'I am a doctor before I am a civil servant' (Cicely Williams 1933)

The preceding chapters have provided a background, both literary and social, for the fiction that created such a disparaging view of British women in Malaya and Burma as well as a detailed analysis of examples of the writing, demonstrating how this was achieved. In the next two chapters, I will examine and scrutinise their own and the contemporary perception of the role played by British women working as doctors and nurses in the colonial societies of Malaya and Burma in the 1920s and 1930s, to demonstrate how different from the fictional accounts these women's characters and lives were.

To create a relevant frame of reference, I have provided an overview of the background to and contemporary state of colonial medicine with specific reference to the two colonies under examination. My resulting contentions will assess the ambivalence of these women's position within the intimate interrelation of gender, race, and class structure within the colonial society, and it will demonstrate how these women reacted to and dealt with the intersectional nature of social and professional contends that 'European women in these colonies experienced the cleavages of racial dominance and internal social distinctions very differently than men precisely because of their ambiguous positions, as both subordinates in colonial hierarchies and as active agents of imperial culture in their own right' (Stoler 1989: 634). She bases this theory on her analysis of the position of European women in colonial Indonesia, previously the Dutch East Indies, and, to a lesser extent, in the French colonies in mainland Southeast Asia. She also classifies 'European women' as an undifferentiated group. My intention in this and the two subsequent chapters, is to

break down this classification into three sub-classes; doctors, nurses, and wives and homemakers, and to extend Stoler's analysis to demonstrate how this ambiguity also applied in the colonies of Burma and Malaya. My hypothesis in this section is that, rather than passively accepting the position designated to them by the rules and hierarchies of the ultra-patriarchal colonial societies, they demonstrated agency by using gender not only to manipulate the colonial hierarchy and to maximise the effect of their professional medical skills to the betterment of the general population, but also to maintain their own professional and personal status.

Backgound

To achieve this, it will be necessary to briefly explain the perceived place of female medical professionals in the society of the interwar years and to delineate the essential differences in the common perceptions of the position of female doctors in comparison with that of nurses. I also explain the gradual rise of preventative as opposed to curative medicine with the accompanying instigation of health programmes and progress in welfare and community health both in the colonies and in the metropole to provide a hinterland for the development of my analysis. To demonstrate the ambiguity of the position of these women in the colonial society where they made their lives and progressed their careers, I have made specific case studies to use their lived experiences to demonstrate how women were able to negotiate their way through the stasis of the class structures imposed upon them by the repressively masculine colonial hierarchy.

Much of the material upon which I will rely in this section of the chapter comes from research into original letters, diaries and notes found variously in the National

Archives at Kew, the Wellcome Foundation Archives, the British Library, and the archives of the Colonial Nursing Service at the Bodleian Library.

The entry of women into the British medical profession and how it was perceived by the male dominated medical hierarchy

The Harvard scholar, Dr E.H. Clarke (1873: 81) published *Sex in Education* in which he warned that 'higher education in women produces monstrous brains and puny bodies, abnormally active cerebration and abnormally weak digestion, flowing thought and constipated bowels.'

This view, although seemingly extreme in its physiological reference, was generally not uncommon in the chauvinist world of the late nineteenth century. Prior to this, women's place in the world of pre-Enlightenment medicine was generally viewed with disparagement and suspicion by the male cognoscenti as outlined by Sinéad Spearing in her recent publication *A History of Women in Medicine: cunning women, physicians, witches* (2019) which is concerned with the detrimental pre-Enlightenment view of female healers/ wise women taken by the Church which at its most extreme resulted in accusations of witchcraft. I do not explore Spearing's conclusions regarding the damning connection made by early modern physicians between 'folk' medicine and the occult; however, her work has provided me with an interesting perspective when considering the general medical opinion of unqualified and frequently female medical practitioners.

With their intellectual roots in this hinterland, the male-dominated universities and medical schools in of the late nineteenth century were reluctant to allow women to enter both the higher echelons of education and particularly the medical profession. For example, although, in 1875, Parliament passed the Enabling Act giving the

universities the power, theoretically, to grant medical licences to women, these licences were to be granted only at the discretion of the male-dominated University Courts and in the main, they were withheld (Jefferson et al. 2015: 10). Thus, when women were finally allowed to enter the medical schools in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the atmosphere of those schools was still one riddled with gender division, making the female students' progress in their chosen profession difficult in the extreme.

However, despite all the obstacles placed in their way, a small number of women did qualify as doctors in Britain by the end of the nineteenth century. Most notable among these were Dr Elizabeth Blackwell, who in fact qualified in the United States in 1858, but who, through a legal loophole, was able to practise legally in Britain. In 1865, Elizabeth Garrett-Anderson qualified through the Royal Society of Apothecaries (later to become the British Medical Association). She was followed by Sophia Jex-Blake who studied in Edinburgh but was not permitted to qualify, forcing her to go to Berne and finally to Dublin where she qualified in 1874. In the same year, Garrett-Anderson and Jex-Blake established the first women's college in England which would grant women medical degrees – now the Royal Free Hospital School of Medicine – and in 1885, Jex-Blake established the Edinburgh Hospital and Dispensary for Children (ibid.: 11–15).

The establishment of the first medical schools specifically for women led to an increasing number of women qualifying to practise medicine in the early twentieth century. In 1881, there were only 25 women doctors in England and Wales, rising to 495 by 1911. Additionally, wider social reforms during this time, such as the Education Act of 1918 and Sex Disqualification Act of 1919, led to greater access for women into professions such as medicine.

During the First World War, labour shortages had fuelled gradual increases in numbers of women entering employment across a range of occupations both in and outside the professions. Growing numbers of women were studying medicine in Britain, to meet the needs of the country as men enlisted in the armed forces, although there were still restrictions on where they could study as only a small number of the medical schools would admit them. However, from 1915 onwards, leading London teaching hospitals began to train women, including King's College Hospital and University College Hospital. It is nevertheless surprising that, until the 1930s, the London School of Medicine for Women still trained approximately a quarter of all female British medical students and various bars on women studying medicine continued until 1944 when, as a result of sustained public pressure, a government committee decided that public funds would only be made available to those schools that allowed acceptance of a 'reasonable' proportion of women, *'*say one fifth*'* (Ministry of Health 1944: 99). While this was a positive step to improving women's participation, these recommendations became the basis for quotas that restricted all but the strongest of female candidates from entering the medical schools, thus putting their male fellow students at an inequitable advantage.

The Colonial Medical Service

The Colonial Office was founded in the 1856 and, by the turn of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, every British Overseas Territory whose civil and legal services were not supervised locally, officially came under its administrative auspices.[19]

[19] This government department had been founded in 1858 under the direction of the Secretary of State for the Colonies and was responsible for all the British Overseas Territories except for the territories of the Indian Empire including Burma, and the Sudan which was governed as part of Egypt.

However, although in theory, executive power resided in the metropole, in practice, the appointed Governor of each colony had almost total functional control, ruling with the support of an advisory body (the Executive Council) and a legislative body (the Legislative Council). Consequently, administrative structures differed from colony to colony and although medical departments existed throughout the widening Empire, there was no overall organisational structure. Colonial administrations had long contained medical sections with doctors being recruited initially to serve the needs of the colonial community, a role that gradually expanded to include the instigation of medical services for the indigenous peoples, albeit in a two-pronged ministration divided along racially segregated lines.

At the turn of the nineteeth century, Joseph Chamberlain introduced a series of reforms designed to streamline the administrative infrastructure of the Colonial Service and equip it better to serve the needs of the continuously expanding Empire. These changes coincided with an increasing interest in tropical medicine in the scientific community and in 1899, the Schools of Tropical Medicine were opened in Liverpool and London. Chamberlain's reforms included a requirement for Colonial Medical Officers taking up appointments to undertake a course on tropical medicine prior to taking up their posts and the first of these was inaugurated at the London School of Tropical Medicine.

Although, from the turn of the century onwards, the Colonial Service was officially referred to as one body, practicalities of speed of communications meant that to a great extent, it continued to be run on a country-to-country basis, each with slightly different terms and conditions of employment.[20] However, in 1930, the Warren Fisher

[20] In some areas, colonies linked together under one regional medical governing body. This was so with the West African colonies of Nigeria, Gold Coast, Sierra Leone who, in 1905, formed the West African Medical Staff (WAMS)

report entitled ‘System of Appointment in the Colonial Office and the Colonial Services’[21]resulted in the gradual institution of a more panoptic approach to the recruitment, training and structure of the Colonial Service in general. Designed to encourage ideological unity and institutional uniformity and to bring executive clarity to the Service, it was divided into different vocational branches leading to the formation of professional departments within the Service creating inter-colonial links and including the instigation of a discrete Colonial Medical Service.

Selection for the Colonial Medical Service involved an arduous process of written application where applicants were asked to submit a career history and list of qualifications, reasons for seeking employment in the colonies, six copies of testimonials covering both their educational and professional backgrounds and the names of two referees. They also had to be either British or naturalised British citizens and to have qualified either at a British university or medical school or a similar institution in the colonies or dominions that was recognised by the Colonial Office. Appointments were not officially made along racial lines; however, referees were asked to guarantee the nationality not just of the applicant but also of his/her father and in a singular act of bureaucratic mendacity, selectors were informally instructed to privilege white British applicants but ‘not to base their non-selection on racial grounds if candidates asked why they had not been selected’ (Crozier 2007: 24).

Qualified women doctors were never specifically excluded from colonial medical services but were very rarely appointed. To some extent, this seeming inequality was partly a function of the gender ratio in the output from the medical schools; however, it was predominantly due to the enduring male perception that tropical service of any kind was unsuitable for women, whose perceived lack of

[21] 'Recruitment in the Colonial Services', 1930.

physical and mental stamina would prevent them from serving effectively. There was a small number of female Medical Officer posts in Malaya and West Africa – as exemplified in this chapter in the career of Cicely Williams – but these appointments specified experience and involvement in paediatric and welfare work rather than offering the wider medical and surgical experience open to male candidates.

Unlike the civil branches of the Colonial Service that operated cadet schemes, taking young men direct from school or university, the Colonial Medical Service aimed to recruit personnel who had already gained two or three years' experience after qualifying and, as the decades of the interbellum progressed and the medical facilities at various postings became more sophisticated, doctors who had already started to specialise were being sought out to fill more senior positions.

If the candidate satisfied all aspects of the written application process, then they were invited to interview at the Colonial Office in London in front of a board of medical and administrative professionals. Although the Warren Fisher Report had resulted in a more efficiently run application service and recruitment process, the selection board members remained uniformly male and essentially retained the views of their predecessors in the earlier part of the century in seeking a Colonial Medical Officer who 'must be a self-reliant man, and who should, early in his career, seek to exercise a clear and independent judgement. He must accustom himself to act alone, and to have the courage of his convictions, for he will seldom be able to summon prompt assistance from his brethren' (Crozier 2007: 38).

A rigorous physical examination was also undertaken. If successful, the candidate would be placed on a list and offered the first suitable placement that became available. Regional preferences were taken into consideration as were familial links to colonies; however, no guarantees were made. The medical service in

the Malay States and the Straits Settlements was a popular appointment as it was known to have a higher level of regional integration with systematic promotion schemes, regularised pay scales and the possibility of inter-territorial transfer within the region.

Even after the 1934 reforms became statutory, the Colonial Medical Service was still basically made up of a male educated élite. The selection board looked to appoint the 'right type' with suitable social qualifications, athleticism, mental stability, the ability to command, impeccable morality and self-reliance; in short, the essential values of the British upper middle class.

How the introduction of Western medicine as an active agent of the colonial civil power differed between Burma and Malaya

Although geographically close, the route to colonisation in, and therefore also to the introduction of Western medicine and colonial medical services to the colonies of Burma and Malaya was significantly different.

Burma

By the end of the nineteenth century and following three nineteenth-century wars (the Anglo-Burmese wars of 1824–1826, 1852–1853, and 1885) the British had succeeded in annexing Burma (Myanmar). However, it was not until 1937 that Burma was recognised as a separate colony with its own Governor and colonial government. From 1886 until then, the areas that made up Burma were under the control of the Indian Vice Regal government as a province of Greater India. As such, any medical services provided by the colonial authorities were part of the already established Indian Medical Service (Charney 2009). It has been suggested that the colony was a 'neglected appendage' (Saha 2012: 443) to the Indian Empire and that, to keep costs down, the

British maintained a minimal ‘skinny state’ (Callahan 2005), and this view would certainly seem to be applicable when examining the introduction of the Indian Medical Service into Burma.

An arm of the Vice Regal Government of India, the Indian Medical Service had set up medical schools in India during the late nineteenth century to train indigenous doctors in Western medicine. When this medical service was extended to the Burmese province, some medical training establishments were set up there but the scheme to train Burmans in Western medicine was rapidly abandoned, officially because of the view that the Burmans were unsuitable candidates for training. Jonathon Saha (2012) argues that, although the intent to bring Western medicine to Burma was part of the imperial method of subjugation, this policy was far from successful and resulted in as many abuses of the system as successes. The failure of the training scheme had as much to with the colonial power’s inability to integrate the various autochthonous people into it. Equally, but less apparently, the cessation of medical training in Burma was prompted by economic pragmatism; it was far cheaper to import trained medical staff mostly from Madras, where a training college for Indians was already well established, than to train up Burmans from scratch.

Ironically, as early as 1875, a small number of British women, residents in India by dint of family connections or marriage, were being trained as doctors in the medical schools of the Madras and Bombay presidencies. The numbers of women in training increased with the establishment of the Dufferin Fund, established in 1885 by the then Vicereine, Lady Hariot Dufferin. This fund supported women doctors who wished to work in India and sent Indian women to train in the UK. Two notable examples of

women working as doctors in India are Edith Pechey, one of the 'Edinburgh Seven'[22] who studied with Sophia Jex-Blake at the University of Edinburgh in 1869 and worked in India from the 1880s onwards and Mary Scharlieb, the wife of a barrister at the Madras Bar, who entered the Madras Medical College in 1875 (Collinson 1999: 26). It may seem that the acceptance of women as doctors by the Indian Medical Service foreshadowed that of the medical profession of the metropole. The crucial difference here is that women such as Pechey ad Scharlieb were employed specifically to provide medical care for Indian women who observed purdah or zenana and not as general physicians and surgeons. Indigenous women, predominantly Buddhist, were not subject to the same rules of seclusion as the Hindu and Muslim women of India. Indeed, much has been written, both in fiction and in the academe about the independence of the Burmese women both in the colonial times and subsequently (Delap 2012). It can therefore be deduced that although women doctors played an earlier part in the Medical Service of the Indian mainland, their function was specifically to care for Indian women secluded through the demands of religion and societal norms. Burmese women were not subject to seclusion as the Indian women were and thus, the 'lady doctors' of India were not deemed necessary there.

Malaya

Malaya had also come under British control over the course of the eighteenth, nineteenth, and early twentieth centuries. However, this ascendancy was more gradual and based in the main on trade and treaty rather than bellicosity. In 1867, the Crown Colony of the Straits Settlements, comprising Singapore, Melaka and Penang

[22] Active between 1869–1873, this group of women who attempted to gain professional qualifications in medicine from the University of Edinburgh, was led by Sophia Jex-Blake. (Ross:1996)

was formed from what had been East India Company (EIC) trading enclaves, which, until its demise, had reported to the EIC headquarters in Calcutta. In 1895, this was followed by the formation of the Federated Malay States, comprising Selangor, Perak, Negeri Sembilan and Pahang, while Johor, Kedah, Kelantan, Perlis and Terengganu became the Unfederated Malay States. The Straits Settlements were directly ruled by a Governor, while, in the Federated Malay States, although the sultans kept much of their prestige and power over Malay custom and law (*adat)* and any matters to do with the Islamic religion, they were answerable to a British Resident in each state who reported directly back to the Governor. The rulers in the Unfederated Malay States arguably had slightly more autonomy but each of the sultans ruled with a British Advisor at his elbow, who, like the Governor and the Residents, was indirectly answerable to the Colonial Office in London. Similarly, the medical service and medical matters pertinent to the colony were under the auspices of the metropole based Colonial Medical Service (Butcher 1979), which, along with its branch, the Colonial Nursing Association, was run from the Colonial Office in London.

The medical facilities and health provisions put in place in all three sections of colonially governed Malaya, improved markedly during the 1920s. Until then, conditions were poor and tropical diseases and infections such as beriberi, cholera, malaria, hookworm, and yaws[23] abounded both in the migrant labour communities of Indians and Chinese, in the rubber and palm oil plantations and the tin mines, and among the Malays themselves. To a great extent, the problem had been created by the British colonial state, which, by sanctioning waves of migrant labour with no natural immunity to local diseases, to enter Malaya and then forcing them to live in bad

[23] Yaws is a chronic skin infection characterised by papillomas (noncancerous lumps) and ulcers. It is caused by the bacterium Treponema pallidum subspecies pertenue, which belongs to the same group of bacteria that causes venereal syphilis (WHO 2023).

conditions, caused an upsurge of illness. Inevitably this also affected the native Malays, who although they may have had some immunity to local illness, were vulnerable to new strains and types brought with the migrants (Parmer 1989: 51).

Whether this argument was recognised by the colonial government or not, it is certainly a fact that in November 1920, in his first address as High Commissioner of the Federated Malay States, Sir Laurence Guillemard, defined Malaya as a 'country of arrears, of things which have to be done'.[24] Health and welfare was high on his agenda and included the need to recruit additional doctors and nurses, plans for better sanitation and research aimed at the prevention of the diseases that were ravaging the population.

Progress in this area was initially supported by the new Chief Secretary to the Federated Malay States, also appointed in 1920: George Maxwell, a third generation civil servant in Malaya. Although his relationship with Guillemard rapidly deteriorated as he resented the High Commissioner's official seniority, Maxwell's genuine interest in healthcare and particularly preventative medicine combined with his ability to 'project manage' meant that, in short order, he established sanitary inspections in schools, urban dispensaries, rejuvenated the Malaria Advisory Board, initiated a campaign against yaws, and in 1924 instigated a government initiative to establish a healthcare programme for estate workers in the Federated Malay States (ibid.: 52). Evidence of this increase in interest in welfare can be seen in the following figures. Allocations for anti-mosquito work started to assume significant proportions in the early 1920s with Straits Settlements SS$88,936 being spent in Penang and SS$32,957 in Malacca. Even allowing for inflation, this contrasted with SS$46 which

[24] Proceedings of the Federal Council of the Federated Malay States (PFCFMS), 13 April 1920, p. 822

was allocated for vaccinating the whole population of the Malay Peninsula in 1883.[25] The increased commitment to preventive healthcare programmes was therefore part of a positive shift in colonial healthcare policies (Craddock 1983: 1).

During this decade, the Research Institute in Kuala Lumpur was carrying out research into the cause and possible prevention of chronic ailments such as dysentery, beriberi, and malaria as well as testing patent medicines, many of which, such as 'Dr Williams' Pink Pills for Pale People', it was able to declare as pharmacologically useless. It was also during these years that the colonial government invited the prestigious Rockefeller Foundation to undertake a 3-year rural sanitation campaign with the object of combatting hookworm, which was endemic. Infant welfare became a priority with centres being opened in Kuala Lumpur, Ipoh, Taiping, and Seremban as well as in Singapore (Parmer 1989: 56–58).

Although the official response of the colonial government of the Federated Malay States to disease was one that emphasised the use of curative Western medicine, as the 1920s and 1930s progressed, there was a growing interest in preventative medicine. Consequently, by the end of the decade, as well as the establishment of 44 district hospitals, 4 'European' hospitals, 3 women's hospitals and several specialist hospitals, district health centres were founded in Malacca, Singapore, Penang, and Butterworth. Also, by this time, the two branches of the profession; the medical branch and the welfare branch were moving towards some sort of professional equality (ibid.).

It is clear from a comparison of the last two sections, that the introduction of Western medicine by the colonial power and the establishment of a colonial health system differed considerably between the two colonies under examination. However,

[25] Straits Settlements Blue Book 1883.

in both cases, I can extrapolate economic factors as crucial. Burma, as a 'cadet' province of the Indian Raj was not considered to be worth the expenditure of a separately tailored medical system, whereas Malaya, with its natural and mineral riches, was viewed as a potential profit centre which could only be enhanced by a healthy productive workforce.

Dr Cicely Delphine Williams: early life and development

Cicely Delphine Williams, who joined the Colonial Medical Service in 1929, was herself a child of the colonies, having been born in 1893 into the fourteenth generation of a Jamaican plantocracy family who had left Glamorgan at the beginning of the seventeenth century. That Williams always considered herself to be Jamaican is certain and it is equally certain that Jamaica considered her to be one of its own. In her 2007 book *Pieces of the Past: a stroll down memory lane*, Dr Rebecca Tortello (2007: 94) a niece of Edward Seaga, the fifth Prime Minister of Jamaica, states:

> During her life, as doctor, researcher, lecturer and WHO adviser, Dr. Williams worked in 58 countries and her methods of maternal and childcare were practised uniformly around the world. She is one of many outstanding Jamaicans and one of many outstanding Jamaican women, who deserve recognition for her contributions on the world's stage.

Cicely Williams was also recognised by the University of the West Indies, where she was for many years, a Visiting Professor in the Department of Social and Preventative Medicine, and was awarded an Honorary Doctorate of Science in 1969. In November 1976, the then Governor-General of Jamaica, Florizel Glasspile, conferred the

Jamaican Order of Merit on her. In her acceptance speech, Williams confirmed her feelings of attachment to Jamaica, saying that it was 'most gratifying to come home and find an honour of this sort that has given pleasure not only to my family but also to the people of my district. It makes me very proud' (*Daily Gleaner* 13 January 1992: 281)

To what extent Cicely Williams was shaped by her colonial background is a matter for conjecture. Both her father and mother set examples of benevolent philanthropic care stretching beyond the family and its social 'equals' and into the wider community. Undoubtedly, she was brought up in a society that was informally racially segregated. However, the Williams' had been in Jamaica for long enough that it would have been unusual for the lines of segregation not to have been crossed at some point. Given her early upbringing in the racially mixed society of colonial Jamaica and her own continuing self-identity with the island and its people it would be ingenuous to suppose these factors did not affect her interactions and relationships with the indigenous peoples with whom she worked in her later professional career.

One thing that did mark Cicely Williams' parents out from others of their class and position was their commitment to and faith in education for all their five children, boys and girls alike. Her father is said to have wanted his second daughter to go into medicine and although his reported remark to Cecily when she was nine years old, that she had better become a lady doctor as she was unlikely to find a husband, seems somewhat insensitive and flippant, a letter to her from her mother once Cecily was back at Bath High School in England seems to confirm her parents' hopes for her: 'It is always my dream and my hope that you will do well at school and work for a scholarship and go to College – Oxford or Cambridge' (Craddock 1983: 21).

During her interview with Anne Dally in 1962, Williams reflected on her childhood and the ways in which her parents both knowingly and unknowingly equipped her for the life ahead. She describes her father as having a 'passion' for scholarship and a strong belief in education as a human right. During his time as Director of Education for Jamaica he introduced progressive reforms to ensure sexual equality in education and ensured the appointment of local Jamaicans to higher posts in the educational service and as Inspectors of Schools. Of her father's treatment of his Jamaican colleagues, staff, and servants she said

> People have an idea that white people living in Jamaica would knock the negroes about and treat them unfairly, but there was never, ever any suggestion of that. It would never have occurred to him [her father] to do any of the sort of violence … Have you ever read Olive Schreiner's 'African Farm'? There was never any suggestion of that' (ibid.)

Williams' reference to Schreiner's *The Story of an African Farm*, published in 1883, and her avowal that her family's relationship with the Jamaican people of colour, some of whom who worked for them at Kew Park but many whom were also part of the wider social community of which the Williams's were part, forms an interesting contrast. Schreiner's book, although ostensibly fictional, is based on her own experiences growing up on struggling farming communities in the arid Karoo area of the Eastern Cape in South Africa. Unlike Williams', whose family had been established in Jamaica for two centuries and who were relatively prosperous, Schreiner's parents had gone to South Africa in the mid 1830s as Protestant missionaries. Her father, Gottleib, had proved himself unable to cope with the administration required to run a mission station and, after several unsuccessful ventures, in 1865, was dismissed from the Missionary Society for infringing a ban on trading. Her mother bore twelve children,

of whom the three boys immediately preceding Olive's birth died in infancy. Schreiner's relationship with her mother, who was unhappy in her marriage and a martinet with her children, was deeply flawed partly because of both maternal, physical, and psychological violence. Thus, Schreiner's childhood was poverty stricken, unhappy and traumatic in comparison with Williams', who was raised in a relatively prosperous, happy, healthy family with parents who were devoted to each other and to their children.(First & Scott: 1980) The female African servants who care for Lyndall, the young heroine based on Olive herself, are portrayed as duplicitous and conniving. In theory, the young white girl is in a position of power where they are concerned but Schreiner repeatedly describes actions that demonstrate their apparently devious methods of demonstrating their power over her. Predominant among these characters is the 'angry old Ayah' whose harsh treatment of the young Lyndall could not contrast more unfavourably with Cicely's memories of her old Jamaican nurse as will be shown later in the chapter. (Schreiner: 1883)

Although in adulthood, Schreiner fought fiercely for the disempowered, her relationship with those she sought to legitimise continued to be one of contradiction. According to Anne McClintock (1995: 262), 'Schreiner's identity was fashioned around a tortuous logic of gender, rebellion and guilt, autonomy and punishment.' Without delving further into Schreiner's story, McClintock's analysis places her subject at an important juxtaposition to Williams. Firstly, although both were 'daughters of Empire' in the wider sense of the term, their backgrounds and upbringing could not have been more different. Less than a century away from slavery, Jamaican society was more established and integrated than South African society would ever be.

Schreiner was caught on the horns of a dilemma where intellectually she realised early in her life that equality in race, class and gender was not to be

impulsively demanded but sagaciously fought for. However, on a visceral level, she never lost her early sense of ostracism from the Africans amongst whom she grew up or her deep resentment at being born female, making Lyndall in *Story of an African F*arm cry, 'To be born a woman is to be born branded' (Schreiner 1883: 202) Wiiliams, although she was aware of racial and gender based tensions was not subject to them herself in the way that Schreiner was, and was therefore able to look at them more objectively as will be seen below

As regards elements of racial tension, Williams was adamant: 'we knew what we were brought up with and that we always had a completely liberal attitude towards racial problems' (Dally1962) She described life in Jamaica during her childhood as being subject more to a benevolent patriarchy than harsh racial segregation. The family was not rich enough to pay high wages to their staff but there was always milk for the children, and small pensions and land for retired workers. Medicines were provided in case of illness and medical fees paid by the estate for doctors and hospital admissions if these were necessary. A good standard of housing and basic schooling was provided and children who showed promise were encouraged to continue to higher education. 'In Jamaica you can have friends exactly as you choose and nobody would be surprised at finding people of African or Chinese or Indian extraction all at the house of a man of European descent.' (ibid.). She also believed mixed marriages were just as likely to be successful as any other, claiming that she saw many very happy and longlasting mixed marriages in Jamaica. When asked whether her own family would have approved of her marrying a man of colour, though, she did admit that although they would certainly not have been horrified, they would have been surprised (Dally: 1962*)*

Williams' own views on the racial problems extant in the latter half of the twentieth century, seem to indicate innate pragmatism, as the following quotation illustrates: 'Quite often, I have felt that I have not got what I wanted because I was a woman and therefore at a disadvantage – and I'm quite sure people sometimes use their colour as a form of defence (ibid.).

In this statement, Williams seems to suggest that lack of success can be wrongly 'blamed' on misogyny in her case and racial discrimination on the part of people of colour. Her own feeling seems to have been that rather than attribute failure to achieve to an abstract negative, one should continue to strive. This seems naïve in the twenty-first century, but for a woman of over 70, speaking in 1964, it appears refreshingly ambivalent. When questioned on her feelings about the more recently named 'Windrush Generation' she felt very strongly that Jamaicans who came to England suffered from colour prejudice and that they should be able to achieve as much as similarly qualified British counterparts. Instead, she felt, qualified people were being tempted to come to the UK only to find themselves resented and unable to work to the level of their qualifications, while leaving Jamaica denuded of its most talent (ibid).

Williams was equally pragmatic when questioned on the apparent prestige associated with white skin, pointing out that fair skin has been seen as an advantage in many cultures – certainly those of South Asia, Southeast Asia, and China – going back long before the time when it has been read as a legacy of white supremacy. Her claim that it stems from the assumption that pale skin is associated with domestic work and/or leisure and therefore more likely to be found among the more economically successful is one that relies somewhat on global evolutionary theory but again, I would suggest that it was a remarkably astute viewpoint for a woman of her age and class in

1964, in that it clearly demonstrates her awareness of racial prejudice and the incalculable harm it can cause, even if she does not, in this interview, recognise and acknowledge hers and her family's part in it.

What I found important for the purposes of this research, in Cicely Williams' first hand description of her happy Jamaican childhood was the way in which this and the example set by her parents and family influenced her views not only on theories of race but also on the importance of welfare and education regardless of class or colour. I therefore present it as a lens through which she perceived and was understood and appraised by the British colonial societies within which much of her early career was based.

Education and early career

At a time when many of her social contemporaries in both the UK and Jamaica received the bare minimum education, fortunately for her, Cicely's parents were anxious for their daughters to be equipped for the modern world that was dawning by the turn of the twentieth century and sent both Cicely and her sister back to the UK to school.

Cicely attended the Bath High School for Girls. Founded in 1875, the school was one of the first outside London to join the prestigious Girls' Day School Trust which was set up in 1872 with the specific intention of ensuring girls could be offered the same academic education as their brothers. During Cicely's time, there were approximately 160 pupils, all of them deemed to be academically capable, serious students, who expected to follow a career path of some sort. (Craddock: 1983)

Cicely thrived both academically and emotionally and, upon matriculation and after a year's coaching in Greek and Latin, she achieved both her and her parents'

dream when she was offered a place at Somerville College, Oxford. This had to be deferred as it was necessary for her to return to Jamaica to assist her parents after a devastating series of earthquakes and hurricanes hit the area. Mr Williams died in 1915 and, after a year studying in Toronto the twenty-three year old Cicely joined Somerville to take up her medical studies. The John Radcliffe Hospital in Oxford took no students in the year Cicely graduated and it was only after some difficulty (the men were coming back from the war and their applications took precedence over those of newly qualified women) that she found a training post at King's College Hospital and finally qualified as a doctor in 1923.(ibid.)

Decision to join the Colonial Medical Service

Williams' first job was as house physician at the South London Hospital for Women in Clapham. Although the appointment did not have the prestige associated with the great London teaching hospitals, it meant that she gained valuable 'hands on' experience both on the medical and surgical wards as the Consultative General Surgeon, Miss Helen Chadbourne, believed in giving her House staff practical experience wherever possible. (Craddock: 1983)

From the South London, Williams moved to the Queen's Hospital for Children in Hackney, where she came under the inspirational leadership of Dr Helen Mackay, the first female Fellow of the Royal College of Surgeons. Mackay had already developed a series of local paediatric welfare centres where good health practices were taught and encouraged, and where admission to the hospital could be arranged in serious cases. It was here that Williams became aware of the benefits of integrated preventative and curative health care and realised the need for doctors to know

something of the whole family to effect good practice in paediatric healthcare: maxims that were to become seminal in her own career in medicine.(Craddock 1983)

In 1928 Williams travelled to Macedonia to work with Greek refugees from Turkey. As well as undertaking much valuable research into malarial mosquito larvae and their habitat, she travelled to Skopje in what was then Yugoslavia to work with the Croatian doyen of public medicine and welfare, Dr Andrija Stampar (1888–1958), later a founder of the World Health Organization. Stampa, an early pioneer of social medicine and rural healthcare, had developed a system of basic regional health clinics staffed by local women who had been given basic nursing and community healthcare training. These 'district nurses' also trained local midwives in basic hygiene and the necessity for sterile dressings and implements, and made regular health visits to outlying farms and settlements. Once in post, Williams organised rotas which meant all villagers took baths twice a week under pain of arrest if they failed to appear. Williams strongly agreed with Stampar's contention that no line should be drawn between curative and preventative medicine, and that basic health and welfare care should be available to every social group, regardless of status.

Her three years spent in paediatric and women's' healthcare, combined with her growing conviction that the path to a healthy population lay in a combination of preventative and curative medicine, and an efficient system of welfare clinics as well as her burgeoning interest in tropical diseases, led Williams to register at the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine late in 1928 for a diploma which included the study of public health, etymology, and sanitation. With this additional qualification, she felt equipped to apply for a post in the Colonial Medical Service.

As previously mentioned, Dr Andrew Balfour, of the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine and Head of the Colonial Medical Service, faced with a

diminishing number of male applicants, made the decision to allow qualified women doctors to apply for the service and it would have appeared that Williams, with her 'colonial' background and her qualifications, should have been the ideal candidate (Craddock 1983: 52). It is a measure of the contemporary reluctance of the male dominated medical establishment to recognise the position of women in the profession, that Williams stayed on the waiting list for almost two years and was told, when she did finally get to interview, that nobody wanted women in either East or West Africa and that there were already three women doctors in Malaya. (Craddock: 1983)

Despite this discouraging start and thanks to the intervention of a well placed friend Muriel Robertson, a leading protozoologist and bacteriologist at the Lister Institute in London, Williams was finally offered a post in the apparently female-averse medical service of the Gold Coast Colony (now Ghana) in West Africa, initially working at the Princess Marie-Louise Hospital in Accra.

The Gold Coast and kwashiorkor

In 1929, the Gold Coast was one of the colonies known in British colonial circles as the white man's grave. The epithet itself clearly demonstrates the overt racism of the times: the epidemics of plague, smallpox, yellow fever, malaria, typhus, and sleeping sickness, which periodically swept the region were equally pernicious to all. However, for Williams, used as she was to the sub-tropical climate of Jamaica, the heat was not as enervating as it seemed to colleagues who had been raised in the temperate climates and she felt comfortable in the company of the local people. (Dally: 1962)

The conditions existing in the Gold Coast meant that it was considered a 'hardship' post and, as a result, there were very few other English women in the colonial society of which Williams perforce became part. There were a few teachers,

nurses, and missionaries, but no British children were allowed and if a colonial wife became pregnant, she had to be sent home.

It was during her five years in the Gold Coast, that Williams first encountered serious chauvinistic opposition from her male colleagues – a source of professional and personal frustration that was to dog her years in the Colonial Medical Service. It first evidenced itself when Williams undertook voluntary research into the high death rate among young children who had recently been weaned to allow a new baby to be breastfed. Her male colleagues were diagnosing pellagra, a potentially fatal disease caused by a deficiency in B3 vitamin. However, it was Williams, who, through post-mortem examination and information gathered from local women, made the vital connection between the early infant deaths and lack of protein, rather than vitamin deficiency, which occurred once the breast was withdrawn. Listening to women from the Ga people, she leant that the local name in the Ga language for the disease carrying off these very young children was kwashiorkor which meant 'the sickness the child gets when the new baby comes' and she subsequently identified this to be a totally different disease (Stanton 2001) from pellagra, and one that was essentially the result of starvation after babies were deprived of the age appropriate nutrition provided by breast milk. (Craddock: 1983)

Williams (1933) published her findings in a paper entitled 'Nutritional diseases of childhood associated with a maize diet' in the *Archives of Disease in Childhood* during her first long leave from the Gold Coast. In the article she clearly states that the symptoms she has observed in this disease are significantly different from those indicating: 'Pellagra is generally described in adults, and the character and distribution of the skin lesions are not like those described above' (ibid.: 431).

In fact, and unbeknown to Williams, doctors and missionaries in East Africa and been carrying out research into a similar condition since the mid 1920s . By the mid 1930s, doctors on the Kikuyu Reserve in Kenya had discussed this condition at a meeting of the British Medical Association (Kenya branch) but there was no cross fertilisation of ideas with colleagues working in West Africa. It was one of these East African practitioners, Dr Hugh Trowell, who, once he had read Williams' work, quarrelled with her in print and in 1937, published his own findings in *Archives of Diseases of Childhood* called 'Infantile pellagra'. Both Williams and Trowell were then heavily criticised by Dr H.S. Stannus, then the doyen of tropical medicine and it was not until 1952 when Professor Brock and Dr M. Autret reported to the World Health Organisation that kwashiorkor was a dangerous and widespread malnutritional disorder, that Williams's precedence in its identification was formally acknowledged (Craddock 1983: 66).

The debate regarding whether Williams or her male colleagues were correct in their analysis of this disease of early childhood rumbled on and played, in the chauvinistic world of medicine, a constituent part in her growing reputation as a crank. Scorned by many of her male colleagues for her interest in indigenous medicine, Williams had attempted to work with local healers in the knowledge that her patients considered their skills equal to her own. Eager to gain the trust of the local people and intellectually curious as to their methods which sometimes seemed to be successful where hers failed, she made the acquaintance of several local healers and discussed techniques with them in an atmosphere of equality, sharing theories and inviting them to observe surgical procedures. One local healer, with whom she had developed a good relationship, Ata Orforli, gave her samples of many indigenous medicines, mostly plant and animal based, and explained their uses to her. Williams submitted them to

the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine on her next home leave along with the notes she had made on their uses, but the School refused to examine them and they were subsequently lost; an example of colonial superiority which was alive both in the colonies and in the academe of the metropole and which Williams abhorred.

Williams did not improve her chances of popularity in the medical circles of colonial West Africa with her insistence on the necessity of listening to and working with local women to improve the health of children once they were weaned. This latter theory went against the Colonial Medical Services' own policy in the Gold Coast Colony, which, following the policies extant in the metropole, ordered that 'Well Baby' clinics be set up, concentrating on the health and welfare of neonates and babies up to one year old. When she was directed to carry out this policy, Williams fought against it, avowing that this age group was remarkably well looked after, and it was only once children passed one year and were joined by a younger sibling that health problems started. She insisted to her male colleague, Dr Percy Selwyn-Clarke that there had to be separate clinic days for sick children over the age of one year.

During a very rare and brief absence from her post at the Princess Marie-Louise Hospital, Selwyn-Clarke, discovered that Williams had not been 'following the rules' where clinics were concerned and had also admitted a child with tubercular peritonitis to the hospital. (The Colonial Medical Service forbade any kind of tubercular patients to be hospitalised among other children although there were many varieties, including this one, that were not infectious.) He discharged the child. On her return, Williams, furious with her colleague for his lapse in professional etiquette in discharging one of her patients without her knowledge and, more importantly, consigning this the child in question to almost certain death, protested vehemently. When told that the 'rules laid down by the CMS must be followed loyally' she wrote trenchantly to object, closing her

letter ‘I am a doctor before I am a civil servant. I have the honour to be sir, your humble and obedient servant’ (Craddock 1983: 72).

The ongoing kwashiorkor vs pellagra debate and this apparent insubordination together with her insistence on communicating with and learning from the indigenous people among whom she lived had made Williams unpopular with her male colleagues who felt she questioned the competence of both them and of the regime. As a direct consequence, soon after the incident with Selwyn-Clarke and when Cecily was on leave, her contract came up for renewal, they ensured she was posted away from the Gold Coast and her research. She was sent to Singapore where she was appointed to the General Hospital and, as Lecturer in Paediatrics, to the Singapore College of Medicine. (Craddock: 1983: 72)

Williams was understandably furious at this news. It was personally distressing to be treated so ignominiously but her main reason for dissatisfaction was that she had accrued seven years of careful research and had already contributed a great deal to the knowledge of the disease endemic among the children of the Gold Coast, later to be recognised worldwide as kwashiorkor but which her male colleagues were still insisting was pellagra. Her intention had been to carry on this research, but this would not be possible in Malaya where the predominant diet was rice, not wheat, based. To add to her chagrin, a significant amount of her written research was lost in transit between the Gold Coast and Singapore, and she had perforce to take a cut in salary as the climate in Malaya was not considered ‘pestilential’ and therefore did not carry a hardship allowance.

By examining Williams’ experiences both in her practice methods within the Colonial Medical Service and in those elucidated in her scientific writing, it becomes clear that, in order to be effective, she had to negotiate the intersections set by her

own professional standards and what was expected of her firstly as a woman and a professional doctor, but also as a part of the colonial hierarchy within which her gennder meant that she was inevitably subject to the intrinsic masculine authority. That this required much skill on her part and meant she was subject to many frustrations, both professional and personal becomes even more pronounced during her time in Singapore and Malaya but the following points need to be carried forward from her time in the Gold Coast as they inform her ongoing career.

As a female doctor in the Colonial Medical Service, Williams was paid less than her male colleagues, many of whom also benefitted from 'marriage allowance'. Despite being officially of the same rank, the pellagra vs kwashiorkor debate and her disagreement with Selwyn-Clarke that resulted in her leaving the Gold Coast under a cloud, led one to draw the conclusion that authority within the service was very much linked to gender. This is underscored by the condescension used by Dr Stannus in 1934, who dismissed her work as deliberately failing to recognise infantile pellagra. For instance, at the beginning of his article, 'A nutritional disease of childhood associated with a maize diet – and pellagra', Stannus (1934: 115) states that:

> Dr Cecily D. Williams gave a very interesting account of a syndrome found among the native children between one and four years old in the Gold Coast Colony, which she states has not been described before. … Dr Williams categorically denies that this infection is pellagrous and has given her reasons. These appear to be based on standard text-book descriptions of the disease which, unhappily not always very comprehensive or correct, have misled her into using fallacious criteria for differential diagnosis. Without having seen these cases in Accra, I am venturing to dispute the correctness of the diagnosis and to suggest that they are cases of pellagra.

In my critique of William's article included in the appendix to this thesis, I suggest she has taken a far more rigorously scientific approach than that suggested by Dr Stannus's patronising words; one which, rather than accept 'text-book descriptions' unquestioningly, uses them as spring boards from which to develop what Williams regards as the difference between the accepted diagnosis of pellagra and the condition she is exploring.

Singapore

The colonial society of Singapore when Williams arrived in 1936, was very different and far more formal both from that of both her native Jamaica and the Gold Coast, a fact of which she was made aware even before she sailed for the East. In an example of this from her memoirs, she recounts how, when she was in London waiting to sail, she was informed that Dr Roy Dive, who was to be her Deputy Director in Singapore, and his wife were also passing through. She invited them to tea at the Empire Club where she was living and although Dr Dive accepted, his wife professed to be too busy. Once in Singapore, where Williams interacted with Dive almost daily, she thought it polite to 'call' on his wife' and duly dropped a card into the Dives' box.[26] It was ignored, and Mrs Dive refused to recognise or socialise with Williams for the next seven years (Craddock 1983 : 74).

[26] The calling ritual was observed in many British colonies, particularly those 'East of Suez'. A newly arrived colonial or military officer and/or his wife was expected at the first opportunity to do the circuit of the houses of his superiors, leaving a 'calling card' (much like today's business card) in a box designed for the purpose and situated at the gate so that it was not necessary to enter the premises. It was therefore often placed on the garden gatepost. The delivery of the card would result in social invitations, firstly to pre-dinner drinks, then to varying levels of formal dinners. Wives would initially be invited to tea.
This 'ritual' was highly formalised to the point that, should any residents of the house actually be in the garden when the card was dropped, they would studiously ignore the action, thus allowing their first social engagement with the 'caller' to be at their instigation. Failure to observe this ritual, or to perform it incorrectly, could result in social censure.

Craddock (1983: 74), Williams' biographer attributes this to 'petty snobbery', and, indeed this may have had much to do with it. In fairness, we do not have Helen Dive's side of the story, but I contend that at least part of the reason for this seeming incivility was the ambiguous nature of Williams' position in the highly stratified colonial society of Singapore. As a woman in her mid-thirties without a husband, born to a family that for many generations had lived outside Britain, she was difficult to place. Add to this Williams' professional status as a doctor, still a profession that considered itself to be essentially masculine, in a senior position within the colony's medical service, and her reputation carried from the Gold Coast, of not only being difficult but also of taking an unusual interest in the 'natives' and attempting to inform her medical skills with theirs. Helen Dive's actions, although lamentably pretentious, seem less surprising. One of my intentions in this thesis is to reveal and analyse ambiguities such as this one which demonstrate the intersectionality within which many European women in colonies of Malaya and Burma had to negotiate their paths.

However, in the Dally interview, Williams made it clear that she was able to enjoy her early years in Singapore. Despite the strict social hierarchy, there were more varied leisure activities, more single women with whom to socialise and she had time for reading and gardening. She was a keen member of the Singapore Swimming Club which was open 24 hours a day and where she could go straight from a dance at 5.00 am, swim and have breakfast, and then go on to work.[27] There was also the possibility of taking a break from the somewhat monotonous tropical climate of Singapore with a trip to the hill station resort of Fraser's Hill, some 280 miles away in the state of Pahang on the Malayan peninsula. Here, the humidity was considerably lower and the daily

[27] Transcript of conversation Ann Dally had with Dr Cicely Williams about her life and work abroad, 1962, p. 28.

temperature rarely rose above 20°C in pleasant contrast to the Singapore average of 28°C.

On Williams' arrival in 1936, Singapore's town's population was approximately 800,000 with another 90,000 in the rural areas. Figures for 1931 show the demographic divided along ethnic lines in Table 1:

Table 1. 7th Singapore census 1931

Europeans	8,082
Eurasians	6,903
Armenians	81
Malays	65,014
Chinese	418,640
Indians	50,811
Others	8,275

Source: Saw (1969: 5))

Of these ethnic groups, the Chinese almost all lived within the Singapore municipality while the Malays inhabited the kampongs scattered across the island. Indians, many of whom had arrived as indentured labourers for the rubber plantations, were dispersed between the two; some being involved in farming and market gardening and some in domestic and shop work.

In her role as a paediatrician who championed a holistic and preventative approach to welfare and medicine, Williams was impressed by the system of ante and post-natal clinics that had already been set up under the direction of British nurse, Ida Simmons of whom more in the following chapter. However, she was appalled to find that the Infant Death Rate (IDR) at the General Hospital was 50% on admission. These moribund infants almost all came from the metropolitan area where the Chinese community predominated. Williams attributed this abnormally high infant death rate to

three factors: malnutrition, sepsis, and tuberculosis (Craddock 1983: 76). Babies in the relatively poor urban section of the Chinese community were rarely washed and kept tightly swaddled. The families lived in insanitary apartment blocks, sometimes nine windowless cubicles deep and, consequently, small babies rarely saw sun or even daylight. Breastfeeding was culturally unpopular and, babies, fed on unsuitable milk substitutes, often diluted with contaminated water because they were expensive, were particularly vulnerable. In both the Chinese and the Malay communities, sons were considered preferable to daughters, and mothers who had given birth to daughters were anxious to get pregnant again as quickly as possible, to produce the desired heir. It was believed here, as in other parts of the world, that lactation prevented conception and consequently many girl babies were weaned too early in order that the next child, hopefully a boy, could be conceived. (Dally: 1962)

In contrast to the situation in the Gold Coast, where babies were weaned onto non-maize based foods rather than foods containing lactose when the next baby arrived in the family, poor mothers in the Straits Settlements and particularly in the urban communities in Singapore were subject to aggressive countrywide marketing campaigns offering sweetened condensed milk products as substitutes for breast milk. The Nestlé company employed women with no healthcare qualifications to dress as nurses, visit the tenement houses in an apparently 'official' capacity and advise new mothers that sweetened condensed milk was a preferable replacement their own milk. Nestlé exported the product to Malaya, advertising it as 'ideal for delicate infants'. (Sasson 2016: 1201)

The case for breast milk over sweetened condensed milk

Sweetened condensed milk had been developed as a way of concentrating and preserving cow's milk by removing 50% of the water content and then adding sugar so that 30ml sweetened condensed milk contained 15 grams of sugar, before pasteurising and canning. This process allowed not only for a far longer shelf life than that of fresh pasteurised milk but also meant the content stayed fresh for longer once the can was open, thus precluding the need for refrigeration. The nutritional values of 30ml of sweetened condensed milk were as follows (Table 2):

Table 2. Nutritional values of 30ml sweetened condensed milk

Calories	90
Carbohydrates	15.2 grams
Fats	2.4 grams
Protein	2.2 grams
Calcium	8% of daily value
Phosphorus	10% of Referenced Daily Intake (RDI)
Selenium	7% RDI
Riboflavin (B2).	7%. RDI
Vitamin B12.	4% RDI
Choline (similar to B12)	4% RDI

Source: Dewar: (2008 : 12)

The nutritional content of breast milk is far more variable, depending on the mother's diet, the length of lactation, the time of day and the point in the lactation cycle at which the milk is analysed. However, the following figures (Table 3) were considered to be average for 30ml of breast milk analysed between two and six weeks postpartum:

Table 3. Nutritional content of breast milk for average 30ml

Calories	21.0
Carbohydrates (primarily lactose)	2.3

Fats	1.2
Proteins	0.45

Source: (Dewar 2012 : 2)

However, the fat content can vary by up to 2 grams per litre over a 24-hour period and the fore milk (milk produced at the beginning of a feed) is waterier than the hind milk (milk produced at the end of a feed) (Ibid).

Thus, sweetened condensed milk is far richer and more overtly nutritious than breast milk on a gram-for-gram basis. However, breast milk is designed to nourish and adapt to the growth pattern of a small mammal that develops internally for several months postpartum and therefore does not require condensed nutrition to encourage more rapid maturation. Although small, the fat content is essential in that it metabolises the vitamins and contains long-train polyunsaturated fatty acids as well as cholesterol, both of which play an important part in brain development. The proteins caseins and whey are both found in breast milk in a 6:4 ratio with whey being predominant. Caseins, although they contain valuable calcium and calcium phosphate, clot on entering the digestive system and are hard for babies to digest, whereas whey, which contains vital antibodies such as lactoferrin and lysozyme that guard against infection, remains liquid and digestible (Murray 2021).

Even a basic comparative analysis of sweetened condensed milk with breast milk shows that, for neonates to tolerate the former, adaptions need to be made. Theoretically this might be possible by dilution with water, to replace that lost in the condensing process. However, for this to be successful, it is necessary for the quantities of water to SCM (sweetened condensed milk) to be exact and for the water used to be sterile. In the poor communities where Cicely Williams found this method

being encouraged by the commercial producers such as Nestlé, scientifically accurate dilution methods were not being used and the water was rarely sterile. Add to this the artificially high sugar content and babies developed boils, sores, and diarrhoea, leading to infections which they were ill equipped to fight. SCM was expensive and was therefore frequently over diluted to make it last longer which resulted in a drop in fat content below the level where it could act as a carrier for the vital vitamin A, which supports ocular development and vitamin D, which protects against rickets and convulsions (Dewar 2008–12: 3).

Milk and murder – Cicely Williams' stand against the multinational company

Cicely Williams had long advocated breastfeeding as the most efficient way of keeping neonates appropriately nourished and giving them the best chance of growing past babyhood. Her work in West Africa and the research which led to her isolation of the reasons for kwashiorkor or the 'sickness the baby gets after the new baby comes' confirmed these views, as had her work in the children's hospitals in London. The appalling high rate of infant mortality in urban Singapore shocked her and she became even more deeply incensed when she learnt of the phony Nestlé 'nurses' promoting the use of SCM as a substitute for breast milk from birth. (Sasson 2016 : 1211) Williams considered that a high proportion of the dead and dying babies with whom she came into contact were victims of this campaign[29] and, in 1939, she made a presentation to the Singapore Rotary Club entitled 'Milk and Murder' – the accompanying handout was visually brutal in the extreme (although unacceptable in modern times) and contained the following quote (Williams 1939),

[29] Transcript of conversation Ann Dally had with Dr Cicely Williams about her life and work abroad, 1962, p. 28.

> If you are legal purists, you may wish me to change the title of this address to 'Milk and Manslaughter' but if your lives were embittered as mine is, by seeing day after day this massacre of the innocents by unsuitable feeding, then I believe you would feel as I do that misguided propaganda on infant feeding should be punished as the most criminal form of sedition and all these deaths should be regarded as murder.

This passage illustrates Williams' strength of feeling but the paper, although it continues in an unambiguously critical style, is meticulously researched, and based on indisputable observations from her practice in Singapore. Interestingly, it also demonstrates her views of the class structure of the colonial societyof Singapore, within which she worked, as demonstrated by the following quotation: (Williams:1939)

> The whole subject of infant feeding is a very important one. It is a perpetual preoccupation for all who are interested in the care of children. It is a subject of which a large section of the population shows abysmal ignorance and irrational prejudice.

Among the *tuan besar*, the taipans and the towkays,[30] the death rate among artificially fed babies is only slightly higher than that among breastfed babies. But among the impoverished coolie population of Chinatown and the kampongs, the death rate among artificially fed babies is at least twice as high as that of breastfed babies.

> If the tuan besar's baby is given sweetened condensed milk, it is also given cod liver oil or some expensive preparation containing the vitamins A and D. It also gets bathed regularly; it gets plenty of fresh air and sunshine. It wears soft, fine

[30] *Tuan Besar* – literally 'Great Lord' in Malay. The term was generally used for European men and was the contemporary equivalent of 'Burra Sahib' in colonial India. Taipan (Chinese, Cantonese) could either refer to a powerful European or Chinese businessman, whereas towkay (Chinese, Hokkien) refers specifically to a Chinese entrepreneur and the term is commonly used in Singapore and Malaya..

> clothes that are regularly washed. It lives in an atmosphere that is relatively free from infection and it grows fat and smiling (Williams:1939)

Although her emphasis in this section is on the care and expense allocated to the baby belonging to the *tuan besar* (signifying the white colonial officials and traders at the head of the society), she begins by equating them with the taipans (ibid) and towkays, who can also afford to care for their children. In this way, Williams significantly draws not a racial but an economic distinction between the different sections of her audience. The Singapore Rotary Club was the only one of the various 'clubs' that had been established in metropolitan Singapore where membership was not classified along racial lines. Williams was aware that by speaking here, she had the best chance of influencing the 'movers and shakers' in the whole of upper and middle class Singapore.

Her stated reasons for this apparent rejection of breastfeeding and reliance on artificial milk products are also based on scientific evidence that is classless. Firstly, she blames fashion: 'Breast feeding is not considered smart in large sections of the population, Chinese, Malay, European, Eurasian, Indian, every one of them.' (Williams : 1939) The only ethnic community she later singles out is the Indian one which she considers to be the 'least guilty' and where, consequently, infant mortality is lower. Secondly, she blames cultural preferences in clothing and here, she does specifically blame the Chinese fashion leaders who have promoted the flat chested look, popular at the time and encouraged young women to bind their breasts which have, in some cases become atrophied and useless. Williams does not mince her words when she completes this section thus, 'It will be a happy day for the babies when the Shanghai dress is moulded over the Hollywood figure' (ibid).

Thirdly, Williams discusses the effects of overwork and unsuitable anti-natal nutrition on the ability of the mother to produce milk with a two-pronged attack on the predilection for white rice, which, if it is the main constituent of the diet, can result in such poor quality milk that the baby can develop beriberi, is inevitably fatal and the fact that poor women frequently return to work far too soon after giving birth. She points out that, if and when they become so ill, they are admitted to hospital, a few weeks of a suitable varied diet and enough rest, almost always restores a supply of good, nutritious milk. She accuses the population generally of being ignorant of good techniques for breastfeeding in that babies have their feeds supplemented with sweetened condensed milk at the slightest sign of the mother not producing enough, when a certain amount of perseverance would result in successful breastfeeding.

Finally, but in Williams' opinion, most importantly, the most shameful reasons for this high infant death rate are poor economic conditions. She speaks of a condition known colloquially on the wards as the 'Singapore Disease'. Typically, this involves a baby born into and raised in the airless and insanitary conditions of a Chinese tenement, who has been abandoned by its mother because either she has no milk or because she must go back to work, or both. She has been advised to give the baby sweetened condensed milk which she does but incorrectly diluted and in a dirty feeding bottle as she has no means of sterilising her feeding equipment. The baby is left in the care of a grandmother or older female relative, who binds it tightly in stiff fabrics and rarely washes it, resulting in sweat rashes, skin rashes and boils. The contaminated, badly mixed sweetened food leads to diarrhoea and dehydration. By the time the baby is brought to the hospital, it is suffering from some or all the following conditions: malnutrition, rickets, anaemia, beriberi, boils, and bronchitis, as well as vitamin deficiencies affecting the vital organs and the eyes.

Thus, in Williams' view: 'a baby is murdered by a community that permits the mother to live under such conditions and to discontinue breast feeding' (ibid). She underpins this trenchant statement with the following facts. During the first two months of 1939, 21 babies were admitted to the General Hospital with rickets; of these, 20 had been fed on sweetened condensed milk and of 5 babies who were blind, or partially blind, from Vitamin A deficiency, all five had been fed on sweetened condensed milk.

Williams then goes on to suggest how this situation could be corrected, placing the responsibility for these reforms fairly and squarely on her audience. They can insist that only unpolished rice is used in their households, thus creating the sort of demand that will mean all dealers have to stock it at a generally affordable price. These leaders within the society can actively encourage the women within their households to breastfeed their babies, thus not only giving those babies the best possible chance but also setting a good example to those less privileged.

She also demands that the leaders of the community need to lobby for practical lessons in health and hygiene to be taught in the schools and canvass for legislation forbidding the adoption or sale of babies under six months, thus ensuring that, legally, babies will stay with their own mothers and be breastfed during this crucial period. Employers of female labour should ensure that 'maternity benefits are obtained so that all women workers, clerks and coolies, teachers, doctors and domestic servants alike should have adequate time off for confinement in order to feed their own babies' (ibid.), and that those babies should be taken regularly to a private doctor or a recognised welfare clinic so that their progress could be monitored and sound advice given regarding food, clothing, medicines, management and general hygiene (ibid.).

Sally Craddock (1983: 78) notes, in her biography of Williams, that before giving this paper, Williams had cleared herself with the local Nestlé representative. This was

a very shrewd move on her part as she knew she risked a lawsuit by condemning the use of sweetened condensed milk as a food for neonates (in fact, she approved of it, if carefully administered, as a supplement for older children who were not thriving), but managed to avoid this by not mentioning any proprietorial names.

Williams' 'Milk or Murder' paper undoubtedly demonstrates her own strength of feeling on the importance of breastfeeding in the welfare of neonates. However, it also demonstrates, in her decision to address her paper publicly to a racially mixed audience, her innate belief that every baby, regardless of which division of society it was born into, deserved the same chance of surviving and that breastfeeding was the best way of bringing this about. She recognised the difficulties some sections of Singapore society have, both economically and culturally, in achieving this and here, she clearly marked out the poor urban Chinese community. However, rather than decrying their 'primitive' conditions and attributing blame, she demanded that the wealthy leaders of all the various communities, who made up her audience, not only set good examples in their own lifestyles and habits, but also took practical steps to improve living conditions, provide maternity benefits, develop welfare education, and generally use some of their wealth to improve the human condition, particularly of women, in the entire community. It is a tribute to her, that Williams' 'Milk and Murder' is still cited as evidence of forward thinking by paediatricians such as Pauline Brady (2012: 1) of the University of San Francisco Medical School in her article '*Marketing breast milk substitutes: problems and perils throughout the world*', and Maureen Minchin (2018) in '*Infant Feeding History Revised'*.

Medical Officer in Terengganu

By the close of 1939, Europe was at war which meant Williams' already overdue home leave was cancelled. She became ill with bronchitis that developed into pneumonia and was sent to the hill town of Bandung on Java, then the Dutch East Indies, to recuperate. While there, Williams visited the medical school in Batavia (Jakarta). In 1925, the Rockefeller Foundation had initiated and endowed a system of rural health clinics on Java (Gouda 2009). The theory behind this welfare system which effectively separated curative from preventative medicine (Williams 1941: 721), was to encourage rural people to visit the clinics in case of illness while concurrently sending numbers of trained lay workers into the villages to give lectures and put up posters that gave advice about handwashing, how to use latrines and the importance of opening windows. Williams (1941) felt that, although a great deal of money was being spent and personnel employed, the system was having little effect. There seemed to be little cooperation between the lay workers visiting the villages and the welfare clinics themselves which were struggling to deal with large numbers of sick people, both old and young with inadequate staff to care for them. Williams thought they compared poorly with the joint preventative and curative clinics run successfully in Singapore (ibid)

By 1939, with no prospect of returning to Europe or Jamaica and somewhat disillusioned with the Colonial Medical Service where she could see no room for advancement or promotion, Williams applied for and was offered the post of Head of Paediatrics at the Dufferin Hospital in Calcutta. As previously noted, there had been an established system of healthcare for women in India since the then Vicereine, Lady Dufferin, anecdotally at the behest of Queen Victoria, had founded the Dufferin Fund or the National Association for Supplying Female Medical Aid to the Women of India in 1885 (Mukherjee 2005) and by the time of Williams' appointment, there were far

better opportunities there for female doctors and medical practitioners than in colonial Southeast Asia, albeit they were mostly confined to working within the so-called 'purdah' hospitals.

However, by this time, Singapore was being put on a war footing and her superiors insisted Williams stay. She had been invited by her superior, Dr John Sharf, to accompany him to the state of Terengganu on the east coast of peninsula Malaya, where he had been asked by the Sultan to conduct a health survey. What started as a six-week semi vacation resulted in Williams being appointed as locum Medical Officer for the state; a post she retained until Terengganu fell to the Japanese in December 1941 (Craddock 1983: 83–85).

On Williams' arrival in Terengganu, the state's population amounted to around 300,000 people. To meet their medical needs were three doctors, two Chinese and one Indian, who Williams notes were trained in Singapore and highly competent. There were several midwives but no properly trained nurses and five hospitals of which the largest with around 160 beds was situated in the town of Kuala Terengganu (ibid.: 85). Dressers and medical assistants were trained and posted locally. The Sultan of Terengganu was anxious for Williams to set up a healthcare scheme for mothers and children but had no budget to allocate to the project.

Conditions in Kuala Terengganu were very different from those in Singapore and Williams' recalls in her interview with Ann Dally in 1962 that her tasks on her first day included dealing with weevils in the rice stores and the pug marks of a panther found in the hospital compound.[31] She took over the Medical Officer's bungalow, which, because it was close to the hospital, had the advantage of both electric light

[31] Transcript of conversation Ann Dally had with Dr Cicely Williams about her life and work abroad, 1962.

and a telephone but had many bullet holes in the roof, which she later discovered were the result of a previous incumbent shooting *cicak* (house lizards) for amusement.

Her work at the hospital included morning and evening ward rounds and supervision and administration of both medical and ancillary staff, including the hospital catering where nutritious and palatable food had to be produced that would appeal to and fulfil the cultural and religious dietary requirements of the three local communities of Malays, Chinese and Indians. She instituted regular lectures on hospital and healthcare practice for all staff that became extremely popular and started 'hands on' training courses for local girls to become nurses and midwives. The intensely practical side of Williams' nature is demonstrated in her campaign to encourage her district staff to ride bicycles. This was by far the most efficient way of accessing the more remote villages where there was no access for motor vehicles, but it was considered below the dignity of many of her staff. To counteract this, Williams ordered a bicycle for herself and rode it. She also taught her nurses and midwives how to cycle, provided financial help for them to buy their own bicycles and arranged small pay rises for them once they were proficient.

John Scharff had been tasked with investigating and improving systems of environmental hygiene in Terengganu and under his advice, pipes and purification sites were instigated so that the villages could be supplied with cleaner water, bamboo lined latrines were dug to discourage people from defecating directly into soil and subsoil drainage, and oiling and spraying campaigns begun to attempt to contain malaria which was rampant in the state. Rubbish collections were instigated, and advice given on making compost in order that the soil could be enriched, and more vegetables grown to improve the local diet. As in Singapore, the local preference was for milled white rice, which in this northern state, was supplied cheaply from Siam

(Thailand) but the low vitamin B content in this processed rice meant that beriberi was also endemic. As an attempt to counter this, Scharff persuaded the Sultan's advisors to build a publicly funded rice mill, enabling people to grow and mill their own rice. This proved extremely popular and greatly improved the nutritional value of the rice, the staple part of the diet.[32]

Williams found that there was a rudimentary welfare clinic system already existing when she arrived in Terengganu, set up and run by a Chinese Health Visitor, Miss Kee, who had been employed previously by Scharff. Miss Kee was from Penang but had adapted well to life in Terengganu, learning the local language so that she could interact effectively with the local Malays (Craddock 83: 85). She had already started district visiting rounds within Kuala Terengganu town, encouraging new mothers to bring their babies to the hospital for health checks. As Williams had found in Singapore, there was a cultural reluctance to bring babies into the hospital, which was a place associated with illness and death, so she had a rough, hut-like structure built close by, which, with none of the negative notions associated with the hospital, immediately proved popular. The uptake was equally rapid, when on the back of this early success, a dispensary was built in the town centre. The effectiveness of Kee, Williams and Scharff's' work can be judged in the success of their campaign to have the local people vaccinated against smallpox. Initially, there had been great reluctance as inoculation was culturally distasteful. However, within six months of Scharff and Williams' arrival, they were vaccinating at the rate of 500 people per month.[33]

Drawing on her experience of the Rockefeller system of rural welfare in Java, where Williams had been convinced that, because it failed to take a holistic approach,

[32] Transcript of conversation Ann Dally had with Dr Cicely Williams about her life and work abroad, 1962.

[33] Transcript of conversation Ann Dally had with Dr Cicely Williams about her life and work abroad, 1962.

it was ineffective, in Terengganu, she started a series of visits to the rural areas to make health checks. This required lengthy off-road trekking and villagers were understandably initially reluctant to begin contact with Williams and her staff when they arrived. To counter this, her strategy was to go quietly to the centre of the village and sit in some shade. The natural hospitality of the villagers would mean that someone would offer them water or open fresh coconuts for them to drink and gradually, the people's – particularly the children's – curiosity overcame them, and they would greet the visitors. It was then up to Williams to explain who she was and the purpose of her visit and to enquire if she could help with anyone who had health problems. This resulted in her being given permission to make basic physical examinations and gradually, as the procedure became more familiar, to be invited into homes to visit and provide advice and medicine, if required, for the sick.[34]

As Williams had found in the Gold Coast, the climate in Terengganu made it an area unsuitable for raising dairy cows and therefore the local diet contained few if any dairy products. However, water buffaloes, used as beasts of burden and for ploughing, were plentiful and, if milked, gave rich, high fat milk which was highly nourishing for all members of the community above the age of toddlers and small babies. Culturally, local custom considered the milking of buffaloes shameful and 'primitive' and consequently this excellent food source was wasted, although some of the men were known to drink it. Williams' tactic to encourage the consumption of buffalo milk and yoghurt was to quietly sit in the village centre during a break in health visits and eat buffalo yoghurt or drink the milk herself. She also ordered buffalo yoghurt for the hospital and ate it in front of her patients. When a degree of acceptance among the

[34] Transcript of conversation Ann Dally had with Dr Cicely Williams about her life and work abroad, 1962.

local women had been achieved, she was able to show them how to mix the fermented buffalo milk known as *sapi,* with rice porridge to feed to toddlers.[35]

Williams' work in Terengganu was cut short by the Japanese invasion of Malaya. On 8 December 1941, the day after the attack on Pearl Harbour, the Japanese landed at Kota Bahru, a coastal town some 100 miles north of Kuala Terengganu, which was totally undefended. I do not intend to discuss the chaos resulting on the Malay peninsula following the woeful lack of preparation shown by the British colonial power preceding the Japanese invasion. However, Williams and her compatriots, in the small expatriate society of the Unfederated State of Terengganu, were initially caught in an eery stasis. Japanese planes flew overhead, and looting and rioting started among the local population, understandably frustrated at their colonial masters' apparent apathy when no orders of any kind came from the military headquarters in Singapore and Kuala Lumpur. Three civilian wives started on the road to Kuala Dungun further down the coast and the Sultan of Terengganu and his household arrived at the British Residency seeking sanctuary (Craddock 1983: 87).

At the hospital, Williams tried to persuade as many patients and local staff as could be reasonably expected to get there, to go home to their kampongs. Her head dresser wanted her to go to his family, but she refused, saying that in the case of an invasion, the presence of an English woman in his community could only bring him trouble. Her colleague, Lesley Shield (in the Colonial Medical Service they held the same rank, but as a male doctor, Shield was considered to be Williams' senior) ordered her to leave; again, she protested, pointing out that, as a woman and a doctor, she might expect better treatment from the invaders while he, if he could escape,

[35] The 'friendly' bacteria created during fermentation, made this *sapi* more hygienic for the little ones than fresh milk.

would be of more use to the fighting forces and the Malays. However, he insisted, and Williams made rapid plans to leave. (Craddock 1983: 88)

Flight and imprisonment

Along with a small party of Europeans, Williams trekked through the mountainous interior to the rail head at Tembeling in Pahang state, and following a chaotic rail journey, arrived in Singapore on 20 December 1941. Once there, she was asked to take charge of organisations providing care for the increasing numbers of war orphans. Despite the constant bombing, from then until the middle of February 1942 Williams and her team of two doctors, two matrons, and one nursing sister worked tirelessly to keep these children in some sort of state of safety. This is an extract from her account of the fall of Singapore: '13th April : 'by 5 am the shelling was so intense that there were bits of metal flying about everywhere. I picked up the babies in armfuls and put them under the bed with three or four mattresses.' (Dally A. :1962)

On the 15 April the water supply failed at the General Hospital, and the next day they were ordered to take the children to the Mikayo (Victory) Hospital (the old Mental Hospital). Fearing for their lives there, Williams arranged many last-minute informal adoptions, feeling that any life outside the Mikayo was preferable for those children that had a chance of survival. By the end of the month and suffering from severe dysentery, Williams was finally interned in the women's prison in Changi.(Craddock 1983 :105)

Initially, 300 women were interned in Changi of whom 20 were pregnant on arrival. Williams was given the job of supervising the women's diets and assisting Australian Dr Margaret Smallwood who was tasked with caring for the children. Williams continued to promote breastfeeding and the success of her campaign was

proudly registered in her notes, ‘20 babies born in the camp and 20 babies survived – you can’t do better than that!’(Craddock: 1983: 123)

By August 1942, Williams had become the official representative of the 6 doctors and 70 nurses who had by then been interned. The babies may have survived but conditions in the camp were going downhill fast – food rations were poor and consisted mostly of low grade rice and a few vegetables. Beriberi became rife and with a total lack of medicine, Williams and her colleagues had to rely on herbal remedies and a few vitamin B tablets when they could get them. Red Cross parcels were plundered before the internees received them and without any insulin, diabetics were among the first to die. Numbers were increasing – what had started as 300 internees swelled to 2,350. Despite the deprivation and general chaos around her, Williams took meticulous notes of treatments given and medicines dispensed, intending to write up her conclusions should she survive; however, these were mostly taken by the Kempetai (Japanese Secret Police). (Craddock 1983: 101-109)

In October 1943, the Australian navy managed to blow up Japanese ships in Singapore harbour. The Kempetai were convinced that radios and transmitters hidden in Changi had been used to aid and abet the raid and the women’s prison was raided. On 10 October, the infamous ‘double tenth’, internees started to be taken for interrogation and torture to Outram Road Gaol and on the 23 October it was Williams’ turn. She was initially kept in a cage with three men and questioned for two days regarding her friends and connections in Singapore, her work as Camp Commandant (she had briefly served in this role) and how she had distributed news among the other inmates and her contacts, if any, with the doctors in the mens' camp. The interrogations were intense, but she was not physically tortured. (Craddock 1983: 110)

Following this ordeal, she was moved to a larger cage where, again, she was the only female, this time among twelve prisoners. She was deprived of anything that could have been of use like hairpins and knicker elastic and worst of all for Williams, her glasses. Prisoners had to remain seated on the cage floor and were not allowed to talk or to help companions when they were returned following bouts of physical torture – this last order Williams disobeyed, doing what she could and using much of the little spare clothing she had as bandages. In January 1944, Williams was moved to the same cage as another famous inmate, the journalist Freddie Bloom, where, at last, her glasses were returned to her. Bloom contracted beri-beri at this time and resultant oedema caused a heart attack which, given her general state of neglect and near starvation would almost certainly have killed her had Williams not stubbornly used her professional status to get her patient at least the most basic treatment (Craddock 1983).

Suddenly, after five months and with no explanation, the women were returned to Changi, now overfull, and very soon afterwards, the entire population of the women's camp was moved to Sime Road Gaol. With typical optimism, Williams observed that at least there the prisoners could spend time in the open air, after the crowded conditions of Changi. However, along with beriberi, dysentery, malaria, and other diseases that by now were endemic in the camp, starvation or near starvation became the major challenge both physically and mentally for the prisoners. The calorific value of the diet in June 1945 was reduced to less than 1,000 calories per day for non-workers and about 1,600 for those who had to undertake heavy work and weight loss became complicated with persistent weakness, lack of resistance and chronic skin ulcers. Illness and death were by now commonplace despite the best efforts of Williams and her medical colleagues and by the time of the Japanese

surrender on 12 September 1945, Williams herself was in the prison hospital and close to death. Thankfully she was nursed back to health by Malay friends and was able to stand as a witness in the War Crimes Trials in 1946. (Craddock 1983: 95-123)

Plagued by the spinal pain that was a result of poor diet and confinement in the cramped cages and with her red hair turned white, Williams returned to England where she wrote a report entitled 'Nutritional conditions among women and children in internment in the civilian camp' that was published in 1947, compiled from notes and records she had managed to hide from the Kempetai in the camp at great personal risk, such was her determination not to let this brutal but extraordinary learning experience go to waste.

However, this was by no means the end of Cicely Williams. She spent a time in post-graduate study at the Johns Hopkins University in Baltimore and, in 1948, she was appointed head of the new Maternal and Child Health (MCH) division of the World Health Organization in Geneva, and later transferred back to Malaya to head all maternal and child welfare services in Southeast Asia. In 1950, she oversaw the commission of an international survey into kwashiorkor across 10 nations in sub-Saharan Africa. After taking a break between 1951 and 1953 to nurse her dying mother in Jamaica, she returned as senior lecturer in nutrition at the London School of Hygiene & Tropical Medicine. In 1960 Williams became Professor of Maternal and Child Services at the American University of Beirut. She stayed for four years, and in her time worked with the United Nations Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA) with the Palestinian refugees in Gaza. She also worked with 'at risk' communities in Yugoslavia, Tanzania, Cyprus, Ethiopia and Uganda.

Cicely Williams died in the John Radcliffe Hospital in Oxford in 1998 following a stroke. She was a medical pioneer in many fields – the value of breastfeeding paediatric health and nutrition, the combining of preventative with curative medicine, the establishment of countrywide mother and child welfare services being the most notable.

Conclusion

My extensive research into Williams' background and life has demonstrated her own belief in herself as primarily a doctor. As far as she was concerned, this identity was separate from gender; however, this was not so in the societies both social and professional in Britain, Africa and Malaya in which she operated. A remarkable woman, Cecily's ability to juggle the intersections of the social and professional hierarchies mark her out as a women who, within the suffocating world of male-dominated colonial medicine, managed to improve the health of both coloniser and colonised in ways that were essentially practical but with compassion, determination and humility. In the following chapter, I will examine how women working as nurses also proved themselves capable of negotiating their path through the contradictory colonial structures in which, unlike doctors such as Williams, whose role, officially at least, was comparable to her male colleagues, their professional role was inferior.

Chapter 5 –'I was very happy indeed in Kelantan. It certainly is a bit wild and woolly, but I liked it' – the nurses' point of view

In 1927, the British nurse, Mary Culleton, arriving at the Batu Gadjah Government Hospital in Perak state, writes home that she is 'very happy that she came out [to Malaya) and is learning new things every day'. She feels Perak to be a 'most beautiful part of the country' and the hospital to be in a 'beautiful rural setting, high on some hills looking across a valley to more hills. It is very peaceful'.[36] The climate is very hot and steamy, but she does not find it disagreeable and feels very sorry for everyone in the cold in England. She has already been on jungle expeditions, is fascinated by the jungle trees, is making a study of the local insects, and is making a collection of tropical moths. She is enjoying a lively social life and, while some of her leisure activities such as boar and crocodile shooting, would not be acceptable today, this is certainly not the voice of a young woman who is bored, lonely and homesick.

As I have shown in the previous chapter, British women doctors were the exception rather than the rule on the colonial Burma and Malaya. However, where British women were making an increasing impact was in the field of nursing and it is specifically with these women this chapter is concerned. As can be seen from Mary Culleton's letter and from the letters of many others held in the relatively unexplored archives of the Colonial Nursing Association, these women led interesting, professionally fulfilling if sometimes challenging lives.

Background

[36] Mss. Brit Emp . s. 400/140/4/Singapore bundle

Until Florence Nightingale's pioneering work in the military hospitals of the Crimea in the late 1850s and her subsequent establishment of schools for the professional training of nurses, firstly at St Thomas' in London, nursing had been considered work for unskilled and ill-educated women and, as such, frequently invited contempt rather than respect in Victorian society. A prime example of the pre-Nightingale Victorian 'nurse' can be found in Dickens' famous pen portrait of Sarah (Sairey) Gamp in his novel *Martin Chuzzlewit,* published in 1843. Dissolute, dirty, and frequently drunk, Sairy made her living as a midwife and a layer-out of the dead among the urban poor of London. Dickens is said to have based the character on a nurse in the East End of London and, although Sairy was a caricature, she epitomises the low standards of nursing and health care typical of this era and also the low esteem in which they were held by Victorian society.

Along with the transformation of multiple areas of public health, epidemiology and social science, Nightingale was responsible for the development of nursing into a multi-faceted profession, requiring multi-disciplinary skills coupled with a practical and compassionate approach to care. Her personal rejection of the societal expectations for middle class women to marry and raise a family, by pursuing her own nursing career, influenced a generation of young women to follow in her footsteps. Thus, by the 1920s and 1930s, unlike that of the female doctor, the figure of the professional nurse was a well established and respected one both in the metropole and in the colonies (Woodham-Smith, C.: 1951)

Of primary importance to the perception of the role of the nurse in the community was the widely accepted parallel with that of the role of the mother. The intimate care and support the nurse brought to her patient to restore them to health combined with the ministering image of 'the Lady with the Lamp', bringing words of

compassion to the sick of Scutari resulted in an image of the nurse as maternal figure, compassionate and proficient in caring for her patients as she underpins the scientifically more sophisticated but less personal skills of the doctor, whose orders she executes. Thus, both in her perceived humanity and compassion, as well as the subservient position she occupied in relation to the – invariably male – doctor, the figure of the female nurse was more acceptable in the gender-stratified society of the first half of the twentieth century.

When these nurses pursued their careers in the tropical colonies, Howells et al. (2013: 1) have observed that:

> [t]heir duty as white women nursing the Empire depended on their ability to emulate the 'angel of the home' but the contingencies of their labour (extreme travelling and working conditions, physical proximity to white men and indigenous peoples) tested and transgressed the limits of conventional womanhood.

While concurring with this summary of the ambiguous position of the nurse in the tropical colonial community, I would contend that the women who served as colonial nurses in the colonies of Malaya and Burma in the interwar years did not necessarily envisage their roles primarily as 'agents of empire'. In this chapter, I illustrate how my research has shown that their perceptions of themselves and their situations within the colonial societies where they had chosen to work were more nuanced and complex than this binary analysis might suggest.

To this end, I will first examine the understanding of the role of nursing and nurses both in the patriarchal metropole and in colonial society and review the

changes that occurred during the 1920s and 1930s. I will also give a brief history of the Colonial Nursing Association, under whose auspices many of the nurses in Malaya and Singapore were employed. The lives of individual nurses will be interrogated through their letters and writings, and one, Miss Ida Simmons, already mentioned in the previous chapter and a pioneer of Infant Welfare schemes in rural Singapore, will be examined in detail. The role of the European nurse in the colonial society is not an area that has received a great deal of attention from academics, except for Rafferty and Solano (2007) and Howell et al. (2013) whose work, while of great value when viewed through the paradigm of nursing within the colonial situation in general, differs from mine in that they are mostly concerned with the place of nurses in the wider colonial society, and how the colonised population were drawn into the profession creating a link between the metropole and the colony which was maintained after the end of Empire. My focus is specifically on the British nurses who went to the colonies in the last decades of Empire and how they negotiated their position vis à vis the colonial society within which they both worked and lived.

The difference between the perception of nurses and women doctors by the male-dominated medical hierarchy of the 1920s and 1930s

Unlike the image of the female doctor which seemed to challenge contemporary societal and professional norms, that of the nurse fitted into what was essentially a society where women were generally viewed as being subservient to male authority. Nursing was, from its infancy, a female occupation which developed its own hierarchies and protocols. It was also an occupation that was designed to support professional doctors and surgeons, almost all of whom, until very much later in the century, were men.

The changing role of the professional nurse in the first half of the twentieth century

By the end of the nineteenth century, nursing was seen as an appropriate form of employment for single girls at a time when paid employment was becoming socially acceptable for unmarried, middle class women. Training, initially in Nightingale nursing schools and subsequently in major teaching hospitals throughout the UK, led to the Nurses Registration Acts in 1919 which established formal nursing qualifications. A professional hierarchy of roles existed within hospital nursing and was systematised in a chain of command with an experienced and qualified matron overseeing the work of assistant matrons, sisters, staff nurses, and ward nurses where many of the latter category would still be in training. (Dingwall, Rafferty et al1988:51-61)

Another contribution to the changing role of the nurse in the societies of the 1920s and 1930s was derived from the part they played during the First World War. For the first time in modern history, women as nurses were posted to field hospitals and dressing stations close to the front lines in both the European and the Middle Eastern theatres of war. Women, both those who were trained and the Voluntary Aid Detachments (VADs) were expected to work in the most challenging circumstances, taking vital roles in intricate and complex emergency surgery in the days before antibiotics, and with little knowledge of antiseptics. Anaesthesia was in its infancy and many senior nurses undertook basic anaesthetics training to perform this function in operating theatres. If a surgeon was unavailable, nurses would often be asked to carry out surgical procedures themselves and, by the last years of the conflict, were running the first ‘blood banks’ as the science of blood transfusion became a vital factor in emergency medicine (Bhardwa 2014: 1). During this time, the traditional boundaries

of the medical hierarchy in which nurses (women) were automatically in a subservient position to doctors (men) became blurred. However, as I will show, this situation was a temporary anomaly rather than a real change in the structure of the relationship.

The Colonial Nursing Association

The Colonial Nursing Association (CNA) was started by Mrs Frances Piggott in 1895 with the aim of supplying Britain's dominions and colonies with trained nurses predominantly to support the health of the colonists. Over the following 70 years, the name of the service was to change twice – to the Overseas Nursing Service and to the Colonial Nursing Service in 1940 – and over 8,400 women would be recruited before it was finally disbanded in 1966 (Rafferty and Solano 2007: 147–148).

Who were these women who took up the call to nurse in the colonies? Some recruits came from missionary families or families who had previous connections with the colonies but all had to fulfil the CNA's credentials as lady spinsters and women of good character, as advocated by Florence Nightingale herself (Rafferty 1996: 27, 38–41, 54–55). In fact, in order to be accepted into the service, nurses had to have been trained in a Nightingale nursing school as applicants who had trained elsewhere were considered 'common'. In the CNA archives, reports from admission interviews, stored in the Bodleian Library, a clear preference is shown for women who are 'somewhat uneducated but thoroughly respectable'.[37]

The CNA was a branch of the swiftly expanding Colonial Service and thus, these nurses could be considered to be the first women the Service recruited.

[37] CNA Archives, Weston Library, Bodleian, Oxford, Mss Brit Emp s 400 Vol. 400 e.g. entries 195 and 241.

However, their status was inferior to male recruits in similar branches of the service which meant they were discriminated against both socially and financially. Their contracts, pay and working conditions were inferior to those of their male compatriots.[38] It was not until 1937, when the CNA morphed into the Colonial Nursing Service, that the concept of offering pension plans and a regular salary structure to women prepared to nurse in the colonies was even suggested. Until then, individual colonies had administered their nursing services independently and this new policy which was intended to 'level-up' the staus of nurses was not at all popular with the colonial administrations (ibid.). Considered to be merely carrying out 'women's work', their status in the essentially masculine colonial hierarchy was low and their work undervalued. Few were given any specific training to equip them to deal with the conditions and diseases they would encounter and be expected to nurse when they reached their postings and although, as the first half of the twentieth century progressed, many nurses in the CNA were expected to undertake public health work, again, little guidance or training was in place to support and facilitate this.

Although initially, nurses in the CNA were dispatched to the colonies to provide medical support for the colonists, as the twentieth century continued, health schemes throughout the Empire extended their remit to encompass care for the colonised peoples indigenous to the local areas and CNA nurses were to be found working in both European and native hospitals, or in hospitals where colonial and colonised were separated only by wing or ward. By the 1930s and particularly in the East and West African, and Southeast Asian colonies, CNA nurses were contributing to the

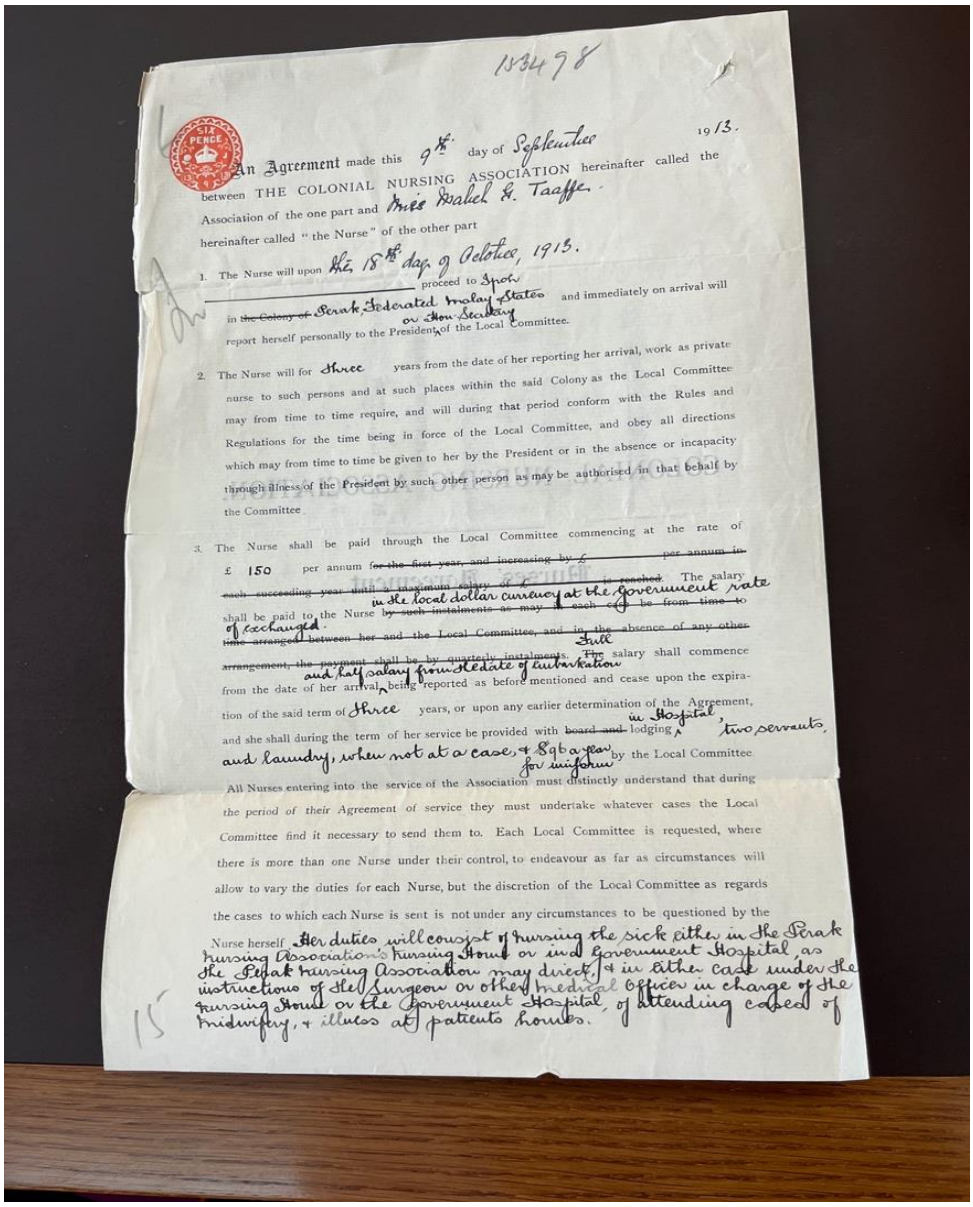
[38] CO 850/84/12.

development and training of the fledgling local nursing services as well as running and staffing outreach district health services for isolated indigenous communities.

> By 1939, what had become the Overseas Nursing Service presented a report to the Secretary of State for the Colonies positioning nursing as an important cultural conduit into the local population through nursing the sick in native hospitals, training local nurses and welfare work among the mothers and babies, she (*the European nurse*) is brought closely into touch with the life of the people and her value to the colony increases as she becomes familiar with the language and customs and wins the confidence of the native people, especially the women (Rafferty and Solano 2007: 151).

By the time of the Nurses Registration Acts of 1919, female nurses had achieved a respected position in British society. They were professionally qualified and had proved themselves both in civilian hospitals where they succeeded in providing effective healthcare and sound administration and on the battle fields where they had demonstrated themselves efficient and capable in the most demanding of conditions. The submissive ‘angel of the house' had seemingly metamorphosed into the dynamic ‘angel of the wards’. However, although nursing had become a respected profession for women, it remained one which existed within but subservient to the essentially male-dominated world of medicine. Nurses, however well trained, were there to minister to and care for patients by rigorously following the orders of doctors. This pattern mirrored the predominant social and political paradigm of the time where, although challenges to the system had begun, masculine dominance was still obligatory in both the metropole and the colonies.

Nurses' contracts



1834 98

An Agreement made this 9th day of September 1913.
between THE COLONIAL NURSING ASSOCIATION hereinafter called the Association of the one part and Miss Walch E. Taaffe.
hereinafter called "the Nurse" of the other part

1. The Nurse will upon the 18th day of October, 1913. proceed to Ipoh in ~~the Colony of~~ Perak, Federated Malay States and immediately on arrival will report herself personally to the President or Hon Secretary of the Local Committee.

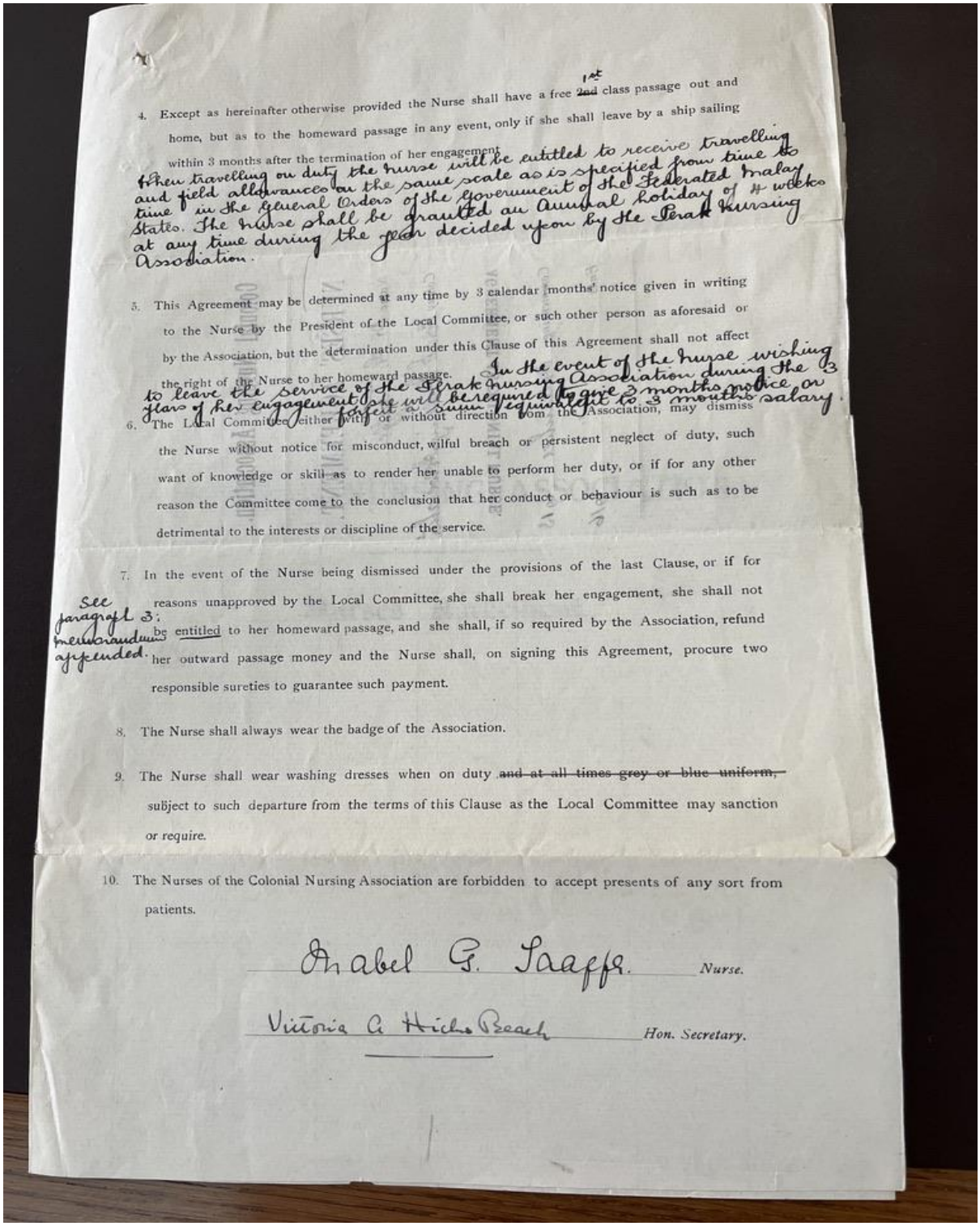
2. The Nurse will for Three years from the date of her reporting her arrival, work as private nurse to such persons and at such places within the said Colony as the Local Committee may from time to time require, and will during that period conform with the Rules and Regulations for the time being in force of the Local Committee, and obey all directions which may from time to time be given to her by the President or in the absence or incapacity through illness of the President by such other person as may be authorised in that behalf by the Committee.

3. The Nurse shall be paid through the Local Committee commencing at the rate of £ 150 per annum ~~for the first year, and increasing by £ per annum in each succeeding year until a maximum salary of £ is reached~~. The salary shall be paid to the Nurse ~~by such instalments as may be~~ in the local dollar currency at the Government rate of exchanged. ~~between her and the Local Committee, and in the absence of any other mode arranged between her and the Local Committee, and in the absence of any other arrangement, the payment shall be by quarterly instalments.~~ The salary shall commence from the date of her arrival, being reported as before mentioned and cease upon the expiration of the said term of Three years, or upon any earlier determination of the Agreement, and she shall during the term of her service be provided with ~~board and~~ lodging in Hospital, two servants, and laundry, when not at a case, + $96 a year for uniform by the Local Committee.

All Nurses entering into the service of the Association must distinctly understand that during the period of their Agreement of service they must undertake whatever cases the Local Committee find it necessary to send them to. Each Local Committee is requested, where there is more than one Nurse under their control, to endeavour as far as circumstances will allow to vary the duties for each Nurse, but the discretion of the Local Committee as regards the cases to which each Nurse is sent is not under any circumstances to be questioned by the Nurse herself. Her duties will consist of nursing the sick either in the Perak Nursing Association's Nursing Home or in a Government Hospital, as the Perak Nursing Association may direct, & in either case under the instructions of the Surgeon or other Medical Officer in charge of the Nursing Home or the Government Hospital, & attending cases of Midwifery, & illness at patients homes.

Figure 2. Example of a contract between the Colonial Nursing Service and a nurse,.

Source: Archive of the Colonial Service Mss. Brit Emp . s. 400/140/4



4. Except as hereinafter otherwise provided the Nurse shall have a free ~~2nd~~ 1st class passage out and home, but as to the homeward passage in any event, only if she shall leave by a ship sailing within 3 months after the termination of her engagement. When travelling on duty the Nurse will be entitled to receive travelling and field allowances on the same scale as is specified from time to time in the General Orders of the Government of the Federated Malay States. The Nurse shall be granted an Annual holiday of 4 weeks at any time during the year decided upon by the Perak Nursing Association.

5. This Agreement may be determined at any time by 3 calendar months' notice given in writing to the Nurse by the President of the Local Committee, or such other person as aforesaid or by the Association, but the determination under this Clause of this Agreement shall not affect the right of the Nurse to her homeward passage. In the event of the Nurse wishing to leave the service of the Perak Nursing Association during the 3 years of her engagement she will be required to give 3 months notice, or forfeit a sum equivalent to 3 months salary.

6. The Local Committee either with or without direction from the Association, may dismiss the Nurse without notice for misconduct, wilful breach or persistent neglect of duty, such want of knowledge or skill as to render her unable to perform her duty, or if for any other reason the Committee come to the conclusion that her conduct or behaviour is such as to be detrimental to the interests or discipline of the service.

7. In the event of the Nurse being dismissed under the provisions of the last Clause, or if for reasons unapproved by the Local Committee, she shall break her engagement, she shall not be entitled to her homeward passage, and she shall, if so required by the Association, refund her outward passage money and the Nurse shall, on signing this Agreement, procure two responsible sureties to guarantee such payment.

See paragraph 3; memorandum appended.

8. The Nurse shall always wear the badge of the Association.

9. The Nurse shall wear washing dresses when on duty ~~and at all times grey or blue uniform,~~ subject to such departure from the terms of this Clause as the Local Committee may sanction or require.

10. The Nurses of the Colonial Nursing Association are forbidden to accept presents of any sort from patients.

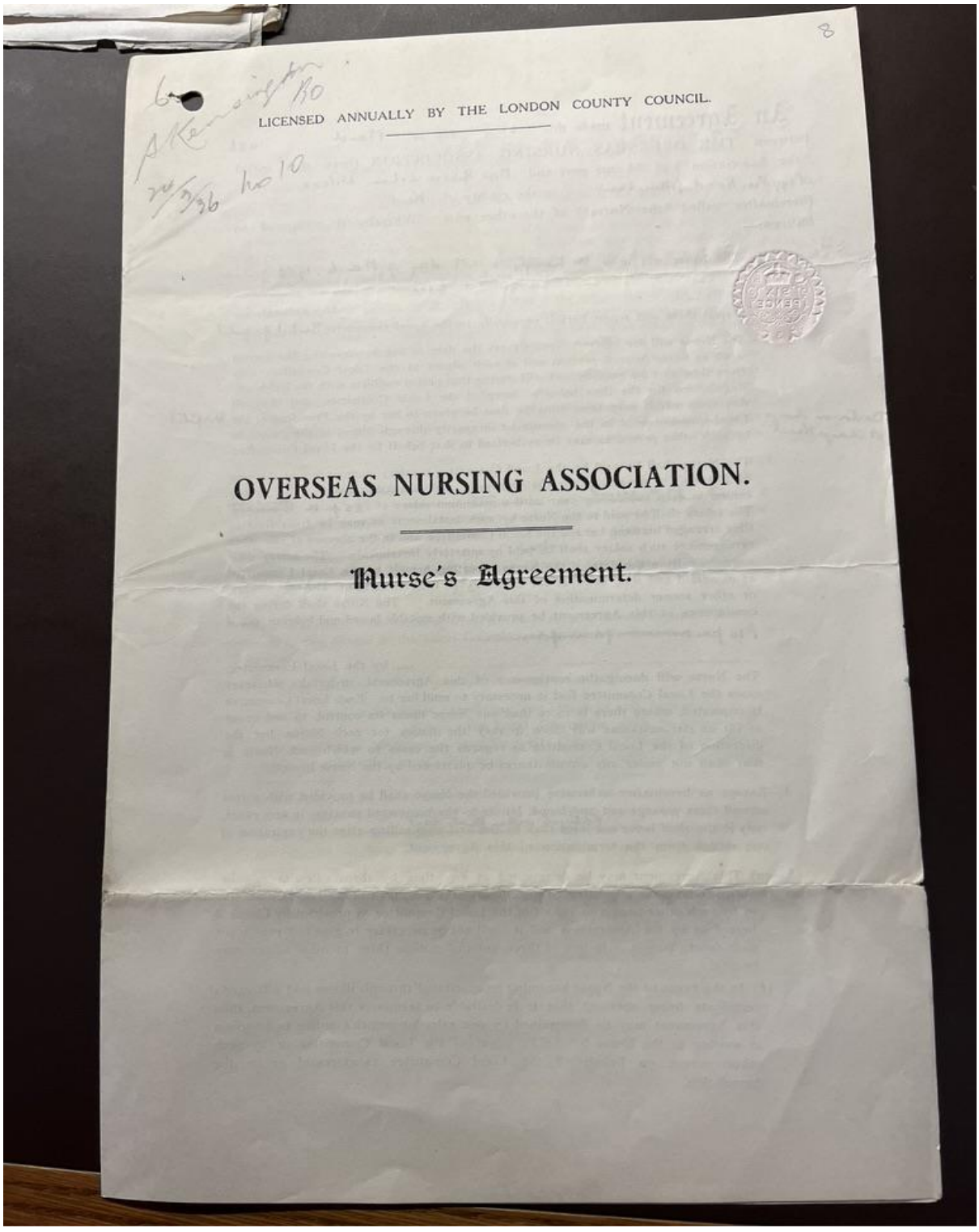
Mabel G. Staafe. *Nurse.*

Victoria A Hicks Beach *Hon. Secretary.*

Figure 3. Second page of the contract between the Colonial Nursing Service and a nurse, Source: Archive of the Colonial Service Mss. Brit Emp . s. 400/140/4.

Figures 2 and 3 give an example of an early contract between the Colonial Nursing Service and one Mabel Taaffe. As can be seen, the contract is pro forma and can be adapted to each nurse's particular posting. Miss Taaffe was to spend three years working in Perak in the Federated Malay States for which she was to be paid the equivalent of £150 per annum in local currency (interestingly, the clause which allows for an increase in salary during the term of service had been withdrawn). Her full salary was paid from the day of her arrival in the colony, but half pay started on the day of her embarkation for Malaya. She was to be provided with lodging in hospital premises, use of two servants and a laundry service as well as 96 Malay dollars uniform allowance. A free first class passage out and back was provided, the latter being contingent on the nurse starting for home within three months of the end of her contract. She would be entitled to four weeks paid holiday per year, but the time will be decided by the Perak Nursing Association.

The nurse guaranteed to undertake nursing as required by the local Nursing Association committee either in the Perak Nursing Home, the Government Hospital or in patients' homes. If she had to travel to work a travel allowance will be paid at the discretion of the local committee. Should the nurse prove unsatisfactory or possess inferior skills, the local committee could give her three months' notice to quit, and her passage home would be paid. However, she could be dismissed without notice for any wilful breach or persistent neglect of duty or if her behaviour or conduct was thought to be putting the service into disrepute. If this was the case, then passage home would not be provided, and she could be required to repay all or part of her passage out. For these reasons the nurse must give two reliable financial guarantors before signing her contract.

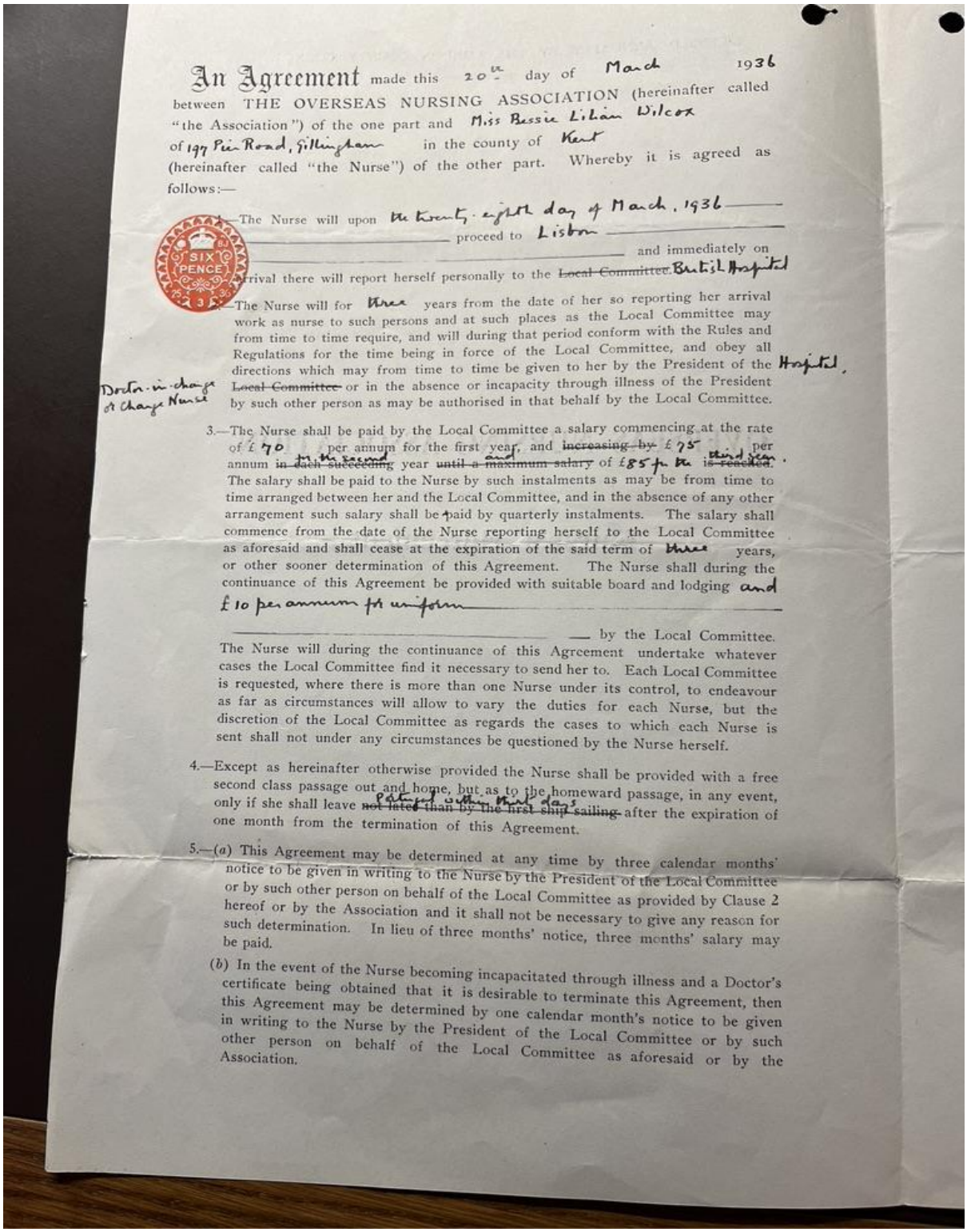


LICENSED ANNUALLY BY THE LONDON COUNTY COUNCIL.

OVERSEAS NURSING ASSOCIATION.

Nurse's Agreement.

Figure 4a. Overseas Nursing Association Contract ; March 1936
Source: Archive of the Colonial Service Mss. Brit Emp . s. 400/140/4.



An Agreement made this 20th day of March 1936 between THE OVERSEAS NURSING ASSOCIATION (hereinafter called "the Association") of the one part and Miss Bessie Lilian Wilcox of 197 Pier Road, Gillingham in the county of Kent (hereinafter called "the Nurse") of the other part. Whereby it is agreed as follows:—

1.—The Nurse will upon the twenty-eighth day of March, 1936 proceed to Lisbon and immediately on arrival there will report herself personally to the ~~Local Committee~~ British Hospital

2.—The Nurse will for three years from the date of her so reporting her arrival work as nurse to such persons and at such places as the Local Committee may from time to time require, and will during that period conform with the Rules and Regulations for the time being in force of the Local Committee, and obey all directions which may from time to time be given to her by the President of the Hospital, ~~Local Committee~~ or in the absence or incapacity through illness of the President by such other person as may be authorised in that behalf by the Local Committee.

Doctor-in-charge & Charge Nurse

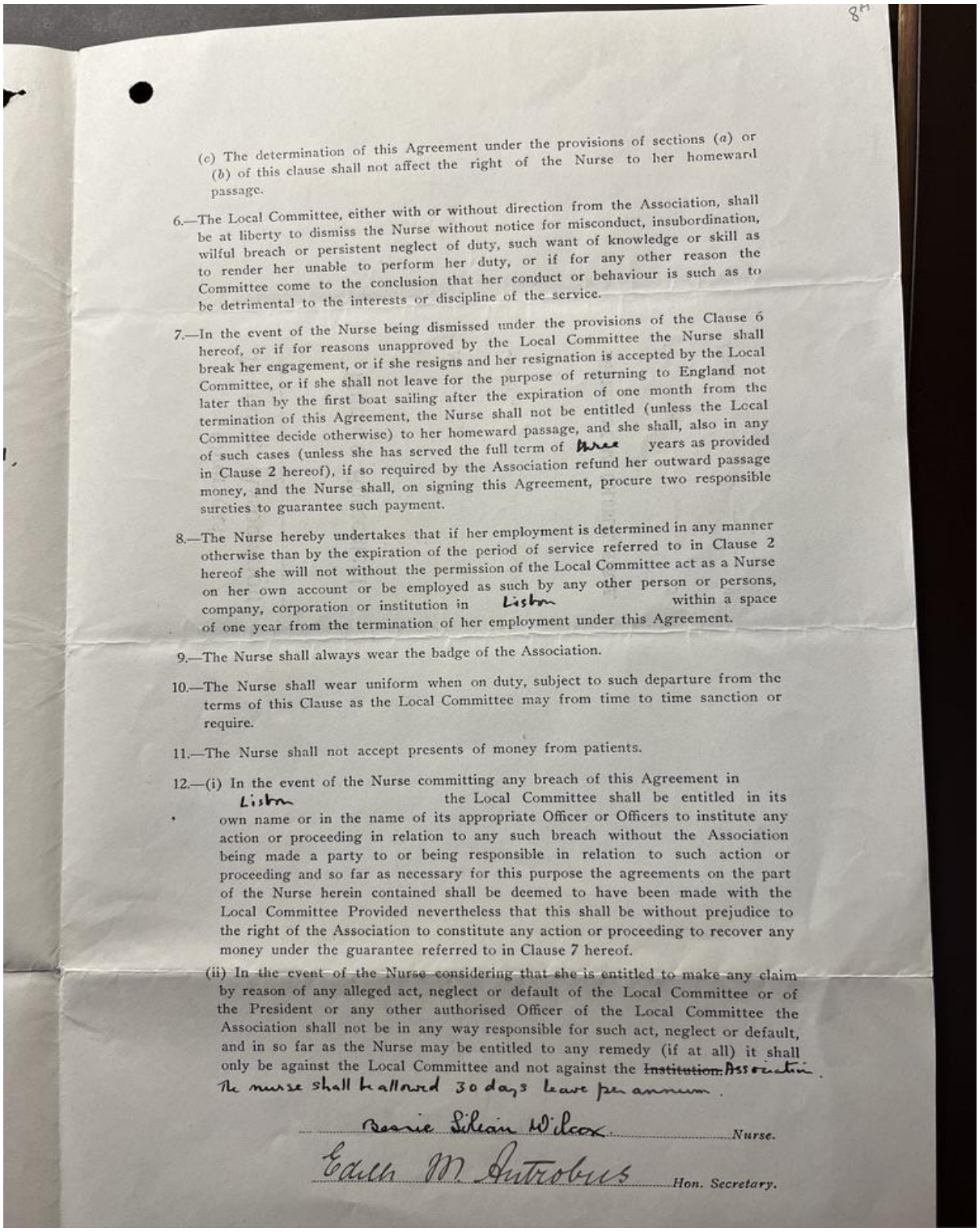
3.—The Nurse shall be paid by the Local Committee a salary commencing at the rate of £70 per annum for the first year, and ~~increasing by~~ £75 per annum ~~in each succeeding~~ year ~~until a maximum salary~~ of £85 p.a. ~~is reached~~. The salary shall be paid to the Nurse by such instalments as may be from time to time arranged between her and the Local Committee, and in the absence of any other arrangement such salary shall be paid by quarterly instalments. The salary shall commence from the date of the Nurse reporting herself to the Local Committee as aforesaid and shall cease at the expiration of the said term of three years, or other sooner determination of this Agreement. The Nurse shall during the continuance of this Agreement be provided with suitable board and lodging and £10 per annum for uniform by the Local Committee. The Nurse will during the continuance of this Agreement undertake whatever cases the Local Committee find it necessary to send her to. Each Local Committee is requested, where there is more than one Nurse under its control, to endeavour as far as circumstances will allow to vary the duties for each Nurse, but the discretion of the Local Committee as regards the cases to which each Nurse is sent shall not under any circumstances be questioned by the Nurse herself.

4.—Except as hereinafter otherwise provided the Nurse shall be provided with a free second class passage out and home, but as to the homeward passage, in any event, only if she shall leave ~~not later than by the first ship sailing~~ Patras within Nine days after the expiration of one month from the termination of this Agreement.

5.—(*a*) This Agreement may be determined at any time by three calendar months' notice to be given in writing to the Nurse by the President of the Local Committee or by such other person on behalf of the Local Committee as provided by Clause 2 hereof or by the Association and it shall not be necessary to give any reason for such determination. In lieu of three months' notice, three months' salary may be paid.

(*b*) In the event of the Nurse becoming incapacitated through illness and a Doctor's certificate being obtained that it is desirable to terminate this Agreement, then this Agreement may be determined by one calendar month's notice to be given in writing to the Nurse by the President of the Local Committee or by such other person on behalf of the Local Committee as aforesaid or by the Association.

Figure 4b. Overseas Nursing Association Contract ; March 1936
Source: Archive of the Colonial Service Mss. Brit Emp . s. 400/140/4.



(c) The determination of this Agreement under the provisions of sections (*a*) or (*b*) of this clause shall not affect the right of the Nurse to her homeward passage.

6.—The Local Committee, either with or without direction from the Association, shall be at liberty to dismiss the Nurse without notice for misconduct, insubordination, wilful breach or persistent neglect of duty, such want of knowledge or skill as to render her unable to perform her duty, or if for any other reason the Committee come to the conclusion that her conduct or behaviour is such as to be detrimental to the interests or discipline of the service.

7.—In the event of the Nurse being dismissed under the provisions of the Clause 6 hereof, or if for reasons unapproved by the Local Committee the Nurse shall break her engagement, or if she resigns and her resignation is accepted by the Local Committee, or if she shall not leave for the purpose of returning to England not later than by the first boat sailing after the expiration of one month from the termination of this Agreement, the Nurse shall not be entitled (unless the Local Committee decide otherwise) to her homeward passage, and she shall, also in any of such cases (unless she has served the full term of three years as provided in Clause 2 hereof), if so required by the Association refund her outward passage money, and the Nurse shall, on signing this Agreement, procure two responsible sureties to guarantee such payment.

8.—The Nurse hereby undertakes that if her employment is determined in any manner otherwise than by the expiration of the period of service referred to in Clause 2 hereof she will not without the permission of the Local Committee act as a Nurse on her own account or be employed as such by any other person or persons, company, corporation or institution in Lisbon within a space of one year from the termination of her employment under this Agreement.

9.—The Nurse shall always wear the badge of the Association.

10.—The Nurse shall wear uniform when on duty, subject to such departure from the terms of this Clause as the Local Committee may from time to time sanction or require.

11.—The Nurse shall not accept presents of money from patients.

12.—(i) In the event of the Nurse committing any breach of this Agreement in Lisbon the Local Committee shall be entitled in its own name or in the name of its appropriate Officer or Officers to institute any action or proceeding in relation to any such breach without the Association being made a party to or being responsible in relation to such action or proceeding and so far as necessary for this purpose the agreements on the part of the Nurse herein contained shall be deemed to have been made with the Local Committee Provided nevertheless that this shall be without prejudice to the right of the Association to constitute any action or proceeding to recover any money under the guarantee referred to in Clause 7 hereof.

(ii) In the event of the Nurse considering that she is entitled to make any claim by reason of any alleged act, neglect or default of the Local Committee or of the President or any other authorised Officer of the Local Committee the Association shall not be in any way responsible for such act, neglect or default, and in so far as the Nurse may be entitled to any remedy (if at all) it shall only be against the Local Committee and not against the ~~Institution~~ Association.

The nurse shall be allowed 30 days leave per annum.

Bessie Lilian Wilcox ..... Nurse.

Edith M Introbus ..... Hon. Secretary.

Figure 4c. Overseas Nursing Association Contract ; March 1936
Source: Archive of the Colonial Service Mss. Brit Emp . s. 400/140/4.

Figures 4a, b and c illustrate the changes in the contractual arrangements for the nurses during the 1920s and 1930s. By 1936, the contract was more specific, and the conditions laid out with legal clarity, thus necessitating fewer informal, handwritten adjustments. A guaranteed incremental rise in salary over the course of the three-year contract was also included. However, a feature of the later contract which is entirely absent from the earlier one is included in clause 12-(i) and is clearly there to distance the Association from any local disputes between the nurse and the local authorities at the specific posting, as the following excerpt makes clear: 'The Association shall not be in any way responsible for such an act, neglect or default and, insofar as the Nurse may be entitled to any remedy (if at all) it shall be against the Local Committee and not against the Association' (Figure 4c).

A comparison between the contracts illustrates an increasing level of formality in the workings of the Association over the course of the interwar years. The initial contract is non-specific and open to individual adjustments and caveats whereas the later example is legally detailed and clarified. Moreover, clause 12-(i) indicates a change in the Association itself from a relatively informal bureau to a more business-like agency, legally detached from the individual actions of the nurses it placed in various positions within the colonies.

Ida M. M. Simmons

I found a good example of how one woman overcame the challenges extant in the career of a British nurse in the colonial society of Singapore, in the life and work of Ida Simmons. There is no personal archive extant and although her life appears not to have warranted academic examination as has Williams' in the previous chapter, I

believe there is enough detail in her own professional writings and contemporary Singaporean press coverage as well as in the autobiographical and biographical writings of her professional contemporaries, to make my examination of Simmons' career a valuable example for the purposes of my work.

Ida Mabel Murray Simmons was a direct contemporary of Cecily Williams in Singapore, having arrived in Singapore in 1926. A Scotswoman, born in 1882, she had served with distinction as a VAD (Volunteer Aid Detachment) in military hospitals in both England and France between 1916 and 1919, and had subsequently trained as a nurse at the Royal Infirmary of Edinburgh. Simmons qualified in 1922 and in the same year, won the only British scholarship for the International Red Cross Public Health Course in London. She then returned to the Edinburgh as Sister Tutor and remained there until 1926 when she joined the Straits Settlements Medical Department. Her task was to introduce infant and maternal health services to rural Singapore (approx. 200 sq. miles of territory at that point).

In 1926, the rural population of Singapore comprised approximately 100,000 people mostly made up of Malays but also including Tamils, Sikhs, Chinese, Arabs, Eurasians and a small number of Japanese.[39] As I mention in the previous chapter, health conditions in the 1920s were poor in both urban and rural Singapore. In 1927, 263 babies out of every 1,000 died before the age of one (ibid.).

Simmons insisted that her first few months in Singapore should be spent learning Malay as she believed her work would progress better and there would be less chance of dangerous misunderstandings if she did not have to rely on interpreters. Her aim was to visit every village on the island to survey their healthcare needs and

[39] Singapore Women's Hall of Fame, 'Ida Mabel Murray Simmons: pioneering public health nurse'

instigate appropriate health services, with her focus being on the health conditions of newborns and mothers. The travelling was arduous, much of rural Singapore lacked tarmacked roads, many villages had no official names, and the people were understandably suspicious of Western medicine, preferring to rely on traditional healers. However, in the following three years, Simmons travelled extensively around Singapore, aiming to visit each village either weekly or fortnightly, with the objective of monitoring the health of babies in their first year and introducing the mothers to Western methods of childcare, hygiene, and diet.

The system Simmons developed was simple but effective. New babies were located through birth reports collected by the rural police and Simmons and her team would trek into the villages, using a mobile dispensary staffed by a doctor and a dresser as a base. Because of the inaccessibility of many of the kampongs, the mobile dispensary frequently had to remain at some distance, but the team would send anyone needing medication or minor treatment there or, if the patient was too ill to get there, summon the doctor to visit the village. Thus, Simmons's team could visit several villages, treating and advising as they went, while the static dispensary received essentially triaged patients. (Simmons, I.I. 1940)

However, Simmons realised that if effective health educational work was to be done in the rural areas, then they needed their own local welfare centres where mothers could 'meet one another, compare the babies and have a gossip' [40] The first of these centres was set up in 1930 and they gradually spread across the island staffed by nurses and midwives specially trained for the job by Simmons. Simmons strongly believed the clinics should not expect the women to achieve financially and culturally

[40] Annual report of the Medical Dept., Straits Settlements and Federated Malay States. 1939.

unsuitable standards and that, as far as possible, demonstrations should be given using items and utensils the women could find in their own home and on no account was a diet that the women could not afford to provide be advised. Local traditional healers were to be listened too and their methods considered and where Western medicine and hygiene methods were felt to be more appropriate, the reasons were to be clearly explained. In addition, Simmons gave regular talks on local radio stations, promoting the virtues of good diet and hygiene for all sections of the population. By 1938, the infant mortality rate had radically reduced to 86.36 per 1,000 and in 1941, Simmons was awarded the MBE (Member of the Order of the British Empire) for her work in rural healthcare. This reduction in infant mortality rate was achieved despite a rising birth rate (Sutherland 2013).

Like Cicely Williams, Ida Simmons was interned in Changi by the Japanese when Singapore fell. There is little detail regarding her time both here and in Sime Road Camp, but one fragment tells us she spent some of her time sewing over 3,000 pairs of pants for the male internees (ibid.).

After the war, Simmons returned to Singapore to help rebuild the rural health services which had been neglected during the occupation. By the time she retired in 1948, there were 15 full-time rural maternity and child health centres with 11 more due to open in the coming months, staffed by a large and efficient team of locally trained nurses (ibid.). Following retirement, Ida Simmons returned to Stirling in Scotland where she died in 1958 (ibid.).

Critique of 'Pioneer maternity and child welfare work in rural Singapore from 1927 to 1938' (Simmons 1940)

In this paper Simmons describes the challenge of setting up a rural health service with which she was tasked on her arrival in Singapore in 1926. My critique of Simmons' paper will provide a more detailed account of a rural situation where there was little or no infrastructure, unidentified numbers of kampongs and a dangerously high Infant Death Rate.

Having spent four months learning Malay, Simmons started a survey of the island outside of metropolitan Singapore. The instigation of regular visits and examination of local police records soon evidenced that not all births were reported. Post-natal beriberi was much in evidence among the Malay women and the children were much troubled with boils, scalds, and a variety of skin complaints. In addition, most of the children over one year old were infected by parasitic problems that made them more susceptible to illness. Despite having been told that rickets did not exist in Singapore because of the sunshine, Simmons found it in many babies and was concerned that this was the result of poor feeding and babies being kept swaddled indoors in dark living cubicles. (Simmons I.I. 1940)

It is in this paper that Simmons states her belief that, if rural healthcare is to be successful, kampong visits and travelling dispensaries would not be enough and that clinics staffed by a trained nurse or nurses would need to be established throughout the rural areas. It was the promotion of this strategy that she believed would lead to the remarkable decrease in the infant death rate over the case of the next several years.

It is clear from this paper that Simmons believed strongly that health and welfare began in the home, a maxim she applied in her rural healthcare work. (Simmons I.I. 1940) She took trouble to appreciate family and kampong dynamics; for

instance, learning that, if she wanted mothers to change their habits of overdressing small babies, it was first the grandmothers she had to convince. Equally, when trying to get accurate birth records, she realised she needed to consider the fact that young women frequently returned to their home kampongs to give birth, and it would be recorded there and not in her husband's kampong. Like Cicely Williams, her priorities were purely professional; as a highly trained welfare nurse, she saw it as her duty to save infant lives where she could and the most effective way of accomplishing this was to instruct mothers and families in strategies of nutrition and hygiene which in principle have been tried and tested in the metropole but which she and her nurses adapted to make them acceptable to the societies where they worked. The success of these methods will be discussed later in the chapter in the section detailing individual nurses' experiences.

That Simmons and Williams were not alone in the essentially professional and pragmatic approach they took both to their work but also to what they perceived to be their place and role in the colonial societies in which they worked I found was underpinned in copious letters written by their contemporary colleagues describing their experiences to the Head Office of the Colonial Nursing Service in London. They were encouraged to write these to furnish the headquarters with a contemporary account of life in the colonies to which they had been sent, as many of the administrators had no experience of 'life overseas'. Their letters are saved in the Archives of the Colonial Nursing Service and are, I feel, a relatively unmined source of information that has certainly been of seminal importance to this section of the thesis and which I intend to explore in more detail in the future.

Case studies of nurses posted to the Straits Settlements and the Federated and Unfederated States of Malaya found in the Archives of the Colonial Nursing Service

As has been noted earlier in this work, many of the female characters in contemporary male-authored fiction based in the Southeast Asian colonies are portrayed as being deeply unhappy, homesick, and marking off the days until their next 'home leave', totally unable to take an interest in, let alone enjoy, their surroundings. However, my scrutiny of the letters written home by the young nurses in Singapore and Malaya who would have been their contemporaries contradict this image. For instance, on the 5 June 1927, Jessie Williams, who arrived in Ipoh in the Federated Malay States two weeks earlier to take up a post in the Native Hospital, describes herself as having 'settled in well' and to be very happy with her accommodation in a large bungalow which she shares with two other sisters. The countryside is beautiful and wonderfully green and although the days are hot, the nights are cool, and she is able to sleep well. She particularly enjoys the variety of shops, where Chinese, Japanese and Indian handiwork, brass and embroidery are available and affordable.[41]

Caroline Harness, who arrived at the European Hospital in Kuala Lumpur in August 1928, does find the climate trying but describes an outing as follows; 'today I went for a drive out in the country and saw lots of banana trees growing by the roadside, sulphur springs, tin mines, endless rubber plantations and most wonderful jungle, one can imagine all sorts of beasts and creeping things in the heart of it.'

Marguerite Francis, arriving at the General Hospital in Penang in April 1929 remarks that although Penang is 'pretty' she had not really wanted to be posted to a

[41] Mss. Brit Emp . s. 400/140/4/Singapore bundle and Malaya bundle. All letters referred to within this section are to be found in either the Singapore or the Malaya bundle. The letters have no individual reference numbers but are filed roughly alphabetically.

city and she preferred Kelantan; “I was very happy indeed in Kelantan. It certainly is a bit wild and woolly, but I liked it.’

Throughout the interwar years, the letters in the Colonial Nursing Association archives provide many examples of nurses expressing their enjoyment and appreciation of their surroundings. F.N. Mitchell, working at the General Hospital in Johore Bahru, writes on 23 August 1937 to say how much she has enjoyed working in Malaya. She feels she has settled down very well in Johore once she had learnt the language and is now a theatre sister. A new operating theatre was opened in December 1936 and is airconditioned which is a huge advantage. She shares a bungalow with another sister overlooking the Straits of Johore with a large garden which she enjoys keeping up with the help of an Indian gardener.

Nurses writing from Singapore seemed to be equally happy with their situation. Gracie Adams, taking up a post at the Middleton Hospital in March 1923, reports she is well and fit and more ‘at home’ in the Malay language and that the hospital garden is looking beautiful after heavy rainfall during the night. Rita Imonchat,[42] Adams’ contemporary at the General Hospital, writes of how much she enjoyed a Christmas trip with a colleague up to Burma, where they were entertained on a rubber estate a day’s journey from Rangoon (now Yangon) while Constance Howarth, arriving at the Straits Settlements maternity hospital in March 1925 is impressed with the modern nursing sisters’ quarters with their efficient plumbing and the newly built airy wards.

However clement the conditions, the new nurses still had to settle into new professional routines and circumstances but, from their letters, they seem to have

[42] ‘Imonchat’ is not a a name to which I can find any other reference. However, there are several letters from this lady, whose handwriting is not easy. Imonchat is the best I can do with her name, as there are no typed versions.

risen to this challenge. In 1926, in Taiping, Mary Day was involved in the start of the scheme, backed by the Sultan of Perak, to improve infant welfare among the local population. She writes that she staged a small Infant Welfare Exhibition at the recent Taiping Agricultural Show, which was judged a success. She gave many practical demonstrations, making things as simple as possible and only using utensils that parents would have or could afford. Day gave advice on feeding, discussing quantities to give and intervals between feeds, using model stomachs to show how babies only had a limited capacity.

Apparently, dolls being used in demonstrations ended up being given a bath every half hour, much to the amusement of the Sultan's wife. Demonstrations on hygienic cutting of the cord and stump cleanliness were well attended and, to her surprise, fathers attended, were very interested and asked many questions as, apparently, men often delivered their own wives, so a bed was set up, showing them how to prepare for delivery. Tables were laid out with examples of suitable types of food for expectant and nursing mothers and free samples of toothbrushes and toothpaste. To Day's delight, the Sultan brought many young women and girls from the Istana (Malay: palace), who were 'very shy' unlike the Chinese ladies who she thought were 'very progressive,' and the event was very well attended.

The Colonial Nursing Association nurses, like everyone else in the colonies, whether expatriate or indigenous, were susceptible to illness. Rose Davies, in 1924, posted first to Singapore and then to Kota Bharu in Kelantan suffered constantly from alveolar abscesses while, in August 1928, Caroline Harness in Kuala Lumpur writes that she has had a bout of malaria and felt 'really ill', hating the quinine she had to take almost as much as the illness. By the end of 1929, she had two more bouts but was content in the knowledge that it was the benign tertian strain which, although now

known to do damage to the liver and kidneys and to cause acute respiratory damage syndrome, at the time was thought to cause little long term damage (Gogia et al. 2012).

Despite this and as referenced above, many nurses clearly enjoyed and took a great interest in their temporary homes. However, life was not without its hardships, some of which were certainly caused by the Colonial Office's lack of experience of the conditions in the postings to which they were sent. In 1924, Rose Davies described her journey from Singapore, where she was initially posted, to Kota Bharu in Kelantan in the north of peninsula Malaya. On her arrival in Singapore in February she was put to work in the native female ward at the General Hospital, for a month before being transferred to the European wards. Two weeks later, she was given a transfer to Kota Bharu, leaving Singapore on the SS Penang on 15 March. She was already exhausted, having spent much of the previous six weeks on night duty and was suffering from the alveolar abscesses that were to trouble her for months to come. She asked for and was refused a deferment of her transfer, despite her illness, her lack of Malay and the fact that she had had no time to learn anything about the customs of Kelantan and the surrounding area.

Conditions on the journey were bad; the cabins on the SS Penang were tiny and positioned over the propellers so both noisy and reeking of engine oil. They were also far from rain proof so that, on the first night at sea when they hit a storm, all Rose's luggage was soaked, and she was very seasick, unable even to reach the glass of water that had been provided for her. By the second night, she was still sick and feeling very ill but found sleeping on deck under a tarpaulin more comfortable. At this point, the captain decided to avoid the rough seas and storm by riding at anchor between some islands until conditions improved somewhat. Here the sea was calmer, and Davies managed a little soup and fish and on the third night, the captain had a bed

made up for her on the bridge as it was the only dry place on the ship. On arrival in Kelantan, launches were provided to take them ashore as the sea was too rough for the SS Penang to enter the harbour. Davies took the train to Kota Bharu, travelling through another rainstorm, where she was met by the doctor and sister-in-charge and provided with dry clothing. Davies reports that it took her a week to recover from the journey. She felt very strongly that the Association should be aware of the sort of conditions the nurses were expected to put up with: 'I was in the most uncomfortable position one can imagine, dependent on two absolutely strange men (when I was) in a state of severe seasickness.' This remark indicates a woman who, although in extremis, is reluctant to rely on men for assistance; this contrasts with the women of colonial fiction outlined in chapters 2 and 3, who seem to regard male protection as their right.

Davies points out that she had only been in Singapore long enough to learn the most basic Malay and had had no time to recover from her long stint of night duty before leaving Singapore for Kelantan. She also felt that the pay was far from satisfactory and that she was barely earning enough to maintain herself, let alone save to support herself should there be a break in her employment after her return to England at the end of her posting. She closed her letter with the following statement: 'I am sending a note to the Chief Medical Officer here, I feel it should be done, for no woman should be in such an invidious position out here.'

Gracie Holmes, in January 1923, underwent a shocking experience when, for the first time, she found the body of an abandoned baby at the gates of the Middleton Hospital in Singapore. Sadly, this was to become a reasonably common experience, but Holmes never lost the urge to 'cheerfully put the parents to hard labour'. However, like many of her nursing contemporaries, Holmes enjoyed her contact with local

women and particularly children. In a letter later in 1923, she reports that she has, for some time, been on special night duty caring for a little three year old Indian boy with diphtheria whose post operative care required supervised nursing day and night, saying that 'I am devoted to him, in fact we all are.' She is similarly devoted to a very premature Chinese baby who only weighed 1.5 lbs at birth, but who, under her nursing, reached two months much to the young mother's delight, as the baby was a boy.

While reading these letters I became aware that many of these women felt themselves to be in a financially precarious position. Unlike their female medical contemporaries, who, although their rates of pay were inferior to those of their male counterparts, seem to have been financially secure, the nurses frequently voice their worries about their remuneration and their lack of pension rights. Their contracts contain no pension rights. For instance, in January 1923, Gracie Holmes complains that things are very expensive in Singapore – 'almost beyond a working woman's income' and in February 1924, Rose Davies complains again that the nurses' pay gives her barely enough to live on and no opportunity to save enough to support herself should there be a break in her employment on her return to England. In 1926, Constance Hardy writes that she would like to remain in Malaya for a second tour of duty but is very concerned that the Colonial Nursing Association does not offer pension rights to those members working in the Federated Malay States although these are already in place for teachers and government officials and, as a single woman, she must consider her future. To these and other financial concerns the Colonial Nursing Association always regretted that 'they could not offer any raise in salary at this time'.[43]

[43] Mss. Brit Emp . s. 400/140/4/Singapore bundle and Malaya bundle.

Relevant press coverage found in the archives of the Colonial Nursing Association

I found, within the archive of the Colonial Nursing Association, a collection of articles from the *Nursing News* and various other contemporary publications which give a voice, albeit an anonymous one, to nurses who have served or are serving in the Southeast Asian colonies as well as features written by members of the committee governing the Colonial Nursing Association, to inform and encourage possible recruits. When I compared these with the letters already discussed and the articles containing accounts of lived experiences, it is clear that there are considerable differences between the propagandised ideas of the committee in the metropole and the realities of the experiences of nurses in post.

An article in *Nursing News* in February 1924 contains a recount of a Colonial Nursing Association nurse's visit to established clients, a Chinese family, living in Bali Lane, Singapore. They were able to converse in Malay and the father and mother were very worried because their infant son was very ill, grey faced, breathing rapidly and had a temperature of 103°F. The nurse commented that he was a 'fat little baby' but that he was bundled up in thick clothing and living in a dark room with no fresh air supply which, in Singapore's humid tropical climate, meant he was extremely overheated. She managed to convince the mother to open a window and together, they stripped the baby, gave him a cool sponge bath, and dressed him again in light wool and cotton garments. She encouraged the mother to feed the baby regularly and to carry him from room to room, ensuring he was kept out of any draughts. She also suggested a doctor be called but the family refused – whether for financial or cultural reasons is not explained. When the nurse called again to check on the baby in the late afternoon, she took prescription medicine and was happy to see the baby seemed to be improving. The nurse continued to call daily to check on the little boy and saw that

the family was taking her advice and that he was continuing to flourish. She managed to convince the family that, rather than buy her presents to show their gratitude, it would give her more pleasure if they bought soap, baby powder and light clothing for the baby. This was one of her last cases in Singapore after a three-year posting and she commented at the end of her section of the article that 'I was very sorry to leave him, also his father and mother, whom I had grown very fond of' (*Nursing Times* Letters : Feb 1924).

In the same publication in September 1928, another nurse explains her situation working at the General Hospital in Penang, which she describes as being at the foot of Penang Hill and close to the Golf Club, the polo ground and the government houses. The hospital had accommodation for 200 patients and there were plans to expand to beds for 700. At the time of writing, however, it comprised three different two-story blocks. Block A was the European Block, and the further blocks take Eurasians, Tamils and Chinese although very few Malays agreed to come into hospital. The nurses' quarters were also about to be rebuilt, which our writer considers to be a shame because the current buildings are very pleasantly situated with large gardens and two hard tennis courts.

The hospital was staffed with British nursing sisters and sister tutors, staff nurses who were locally trained and probationers who were local young women in training. Their training was supervised by the Sisters and comprised three years of general nursing and one year of midwifery after which, on graduation, if suitable, they were promoted to staff nurse. The work was varied and the sisters were faced with treating a far wider range of complaints and diseases than their colleagues in the metropole. The correspondent notes with some amusement, that she has even been asked to treat Europeans who claim to have been under a curse or a spell. The nurses

were expected to work an eight-hour shift (6am to 2pm, 2pm to 10pm or 10pm to 6am) and a rota was in place to give everyone a fortnight of night shifts followed by two days leave. Over and above this, each nurse was entitled to two days leave per month plus two weeks casual leave per year. For this annual leave they were entitled to claim a S$100 allowance on the assumption that it would be used to fund a break either by the sea or at one of the fast developing hill stations such as Fraser's Hill in Pahang.

As far as a social life was concerned, the writer advised readers attempting to follow in her footsteps not to assume they will be welcomed with open arms by the colonial community, but to go quietly for the first few months and to be able to amuse themselves with hobbies and language learning. Things would be easier if she was interested in sports and tennis, golf, swimming, and dancing are all available in the relatively sophisticated colonial élite of Penang (*Nursing Notes* 1928:)

On the 10 March 1930, Lady Edith Antrobus,[44] the Honourary Secretary of the Colonial Nursing Association, published an article in the 'Work for Women' section of the *Star* newspaper in the UK, promoting the role of nurses overseas. Salaries are described as being good and certainly higher than those of nurses in the metropole. The highest salaries went to nurses prepared to go to 'hardship' posts such as those in the West African colonies where an additional allowance is paid to compensate for the 'extreme' conditions; however, because of the financial advantage there were waiting lists for these. Working conditions vary from modern metropolitan hospitals in an area with a large European population such as those in Singapore, to remote hospitals served by local doctors and nurses, where the nurse could be one of only a

[44] Lady Edith Antrobus was the wife of Sir Reginald Antrobus, briefly Governor of St Helena and Assistant Secretary of State for the Colonies 1898–1909.

few Europeans in the area. Lady Antrobus (Antrobus, Lady E.M.:1930) puts a positive spin on the latter situation:

> … the really adventurous girl will prefer a job on her own. In some districts, where there is only one nurse, the responsibilities are heavy and the life lonely. But for the capable young woman who likes to be her own mistress, such posts have many compensations.

The Colonial Nursing Association did not undertake to train nurses to work abroad and therefore they had to be qualified before they applied. If she wishes to serve in the colonies, the nurse must first have trained for three years in a recognised hospital and hold a Central Midwifery Board (CMB) certificate. A certificate in massage or child health would also be an advantage. A nurse who could provide these qualifications would be interviewed by a selection committee consisting of several upper class women who had some link to the colonies. In Lady Antrobus' words (ibid.)'The need is for well-educated nurses, not over 35, who will be able to take their share in the social life of the district.'

The salary scale and conditions of employment in 1930 were as follows. A nurse could expect to earn £250 per annum or £350 in hardship posts while a matron (the highest rank) could expect £600 per annum. The passage out and home was paid and a grant towards the purchase of uniform provided. Under certain conditions, there would be provision for a pension, although in the case of the nurses in the Southeast Asian colonies, this seemed not to be the case and was a cause of dissatisfaction. The Association also undertook to ensure suitable arrangements for board and lodging were made and supervised by a local committee. (ibid)

Lady Antrobus listed some disadvantages – insalubrious climate, lack of sophisticated medical equipment outside the main towns, isolation, and a lack of social facilities in rural areas being the most noticeable. However, she clearly feels the advantages far outweigh these, pointing out that apart from the local trips the nurses are able to take during their three-year posting, there is a long period of paid leave at the end of it and 'If she is the right kind of person, the community receives her with open arms, which taken literally means that she has a good chance of getting married' (Ibid.)

Although it is undoubtedly the case that some of the Colonial Nursing Associaition, nurses found husbands during their postings, evidence from their letters does not suggest that this was a main aim of those taking up these posts. These were, after all, women who had worked hard in difficult circumstances to qualify for their chosen profession; unlike the notorious 'fishing fleets' that went to Imperial India. I would argue that Lady Antrobus's words regarding the possibility of marriage are more a function of her own prejudices, than an added inducement for the professional nurses she placed in colonial posts.

As might be expected, given that she was attempting to encourage recruitment, Lady Antrobus's article is essentially positive in its tone. A contemporary but anonymous article in *Nursing Notes*, written by a nurse recently retired from a career in colonial nursing also presents a positive if somewhat more pragmatic view. She outlines what she considers to be essential credentials for the colonial nurse as follows. She should not be too young or too old, ideally between 25 and 35.[45] Along with her General Certificate of Nursing and her qualification from the CMB, a

[45] This unofficial age limit was in line with the contemporary medical thinking which believed it was unhealthy for white women to take up employment in the tropics if they were over the age of 35.

qualification in nursing from the Mental Health Council could also be an advantage, and experience of fever nursing was an asset as she would certainly be faced with fever patients, many of them with typhoid, malaria or dysentery. Experience of private nursing could also prove valuable if extremely demanding, as, if she was posted to a more remote district, the nurse would find herself in a position of sole responsibility without colleagues to turn to for advice or support (Nursing News : 1930).

Interestingly, in this article the question of race is discussed. The writer points out that: 'The work is among coloured people, pioneer work in many parts and most interesting.' She advises the nurses to employ calm, tact, and patience as she will come up against customs and beliefs from some of which it will be her professional duty to wean people in the same way she is encouraged to 'wean' her European patients off over-indulgence in food and alcohol. Kindness and understanding will be essential in both cases if she is to gain people's confidence and thus to help them. Her concluding advice on this matter is blunt but pragmatic – the nurse must realise that much of her work in the colonies will be 'among the coloured races and if she has a problem with that then she should rethink her application'. Although the tone is patronising there is no doubt that the nurse will be required to treat her patients be they indigenous or expatriate, with exactly the same levels of professionalism and respect.

This writer is equally realistic about the conditions the nurse may find herself in if she goes to work overseas as these are very different from those at home. Certainly, until she is used to it, she may find that because of the heat, the work is more trying and demanding. Although in theory she is supposed to work regular shifts, hours are not always regular, and she would do well to remember that the title of 'Sister' is a courtesy one and she should be ready to turn her hand to anything. The writer, an old

hand, seems to be implying here that the status and privileges that comes with the title of 'Sister' in the hospitals of the metropole do not necessarily apply in the colonies. She should not expect the local European society to necessarily be immediately welcoming and would do well to have hobbies with which she can occupy her spare time especially is she is posted to a remote area. Clearly the role of the professional nurse, i.e. a single woman with a career, is an ambiguous one within the colonial society and this ambiguity may result in a degree of social isolation. It is interesting to note that this 'old hand' makes no mention of marriage opportunities. Her closing remark seems to suggest a sensible and realistic summation of what the nurse who aspires to work in the colonies should be:

> It [overseas nursing] is for the women of energy and intelligence with open hearts and those who will serve; women who enjoy the good times (and there are many) and cheerfully make the best of the bad ones, giving of their best whatever the conditions, and in doing so they will find great compensations and some unexpected rewards (Nursing News:1930).

The concept of imperial hygiene with reference to the nurses in Malaya and Burma in the interwar years

In 'Nursing in the tropics: nurses as agents of imperial hygiene', Howell et al. (2013: 1) contend that, although the challenges facing British nurses in the colonial setting changed over the years, their underlying role remained the same, and that was to use the tools of personal as well as professional 'hygiene' to create both physical and cultural boundaries around her white patients, herself, 'setting colonists apart from their colonial setting'. This opinion is supported by Brian Harrison (1999: 21) who recognises 'the cultivation of personal hygiene' as a means of 'accentuating

individuality and social distinction'. Harrison's work on healthcare in British India points out how opinions changed in the British medical establishment which, during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries encouraged Englishmen (and it was mostly men, at that point) to keep healthy by acclimatising, adopting Indian cuisine and to an extent dress to be comfortable. However, as the Raj grew in authority and the social and racial boundaries became more demarcated during the late nineteenth and twentieth century, hygiene became one of the areas in which the Indian population was judged to be inferior. Therefore the colonial authority regarded the emphasis on the imposition of Western hygiene on the colonised as one method of maintaining control. However, I would argue that for the nurses whose task it was to carry out these policies, the importance of hygiene was to improve the lives of those around them.

That the value of hygiene was accentuated in both nursing training and early nursing textbooks is certainly true. Relevant textbooks for nurses taking up appointments in the tropical colonies in the years between the wars were few but it is significant that the first chapter of *Tropical nursing: a handbook for nurses and others going abroad* (A.L. Gregg 1929: 1–10), is specifically focused on personal hygiene.

However, in this context, 'personal hygiene' is a purely practical concept. Advice is given on how to deal with the main differences the nurse would find on arrival at her new post, those of climate, food and living conditions. The climate could either be hot and dry during the daytime, but cold at night or continuously damp and hot 'like living in a hothouse' (ibid.). Diet could be monotonous, food putrefied easily, and living conditions could vary between those of a town with most urban facilities to those of a country posting where the water supply was crude, the sewage system non-existent, and the insects a plague (ibid).

To deal with these changes, a practical list of necessary clothing and equipment is provided – for instance, the nurse is advised to buy the best shoes she can afford but, in a size larger than normal because her feet will likely swell in the heat. Recommendations on food hygiene encourage her to be rigorous in ensuring food is kept fresh and always protected from flies and dust. Milk should always be boiled and then, if possible, kept in an ice box. Plenty of fluids should be consumed to keep up hydration but again, cleanliness is essential; tea made with boiled water without milk or sugar is highly recommended (ibid).

Importantly, a daily personal hygiene routine was considered to be essential. Underwear should be changed daily if not more frequently, and a daily bath should always be taken in warm or tepid water with a little permanganate added if the nurse was suffering from prickly heat. A good quality dusting powder should be used, and armpits and legs should be kept free of hair by means of shaving or use of a simple depilatory cream. Feet should be rubbed with white spirit to harden them and prevent blisters which could become infected. Any insect bites should be treated with a spot of iodine or weak ammonia, while salt should be applied to remove ticks and turpentine to remove leeches. Shoes must always be shaken out in case of scorpions or spiders. Every nurse taking up a post in the tropics should have her teeth 'seen to' before leaving the UK and thereafter to maintain good oral hygiene, cleaning them at least twice a day with a soft brush and tooth powder to prevent decay or gum infection. Abstinence, if possible, is also recommended where alcohol is concerned (A.L. Gregg 1929: 8–9).

However, I would contend that these strictures were not advised to deliberately set boundaries between nurses and patients with the nurse in the superior position, but merely to ensure as far as possible, the health of the nurses. These young women

were coming from a country where the strict personal hygiene they were being taught would have been as foreign to most of them as it was to their patients and its main purpose was to keep them healthy and enable them to perform the job for which they were employed with maximum efficiency. They needed to protect themselves as far as possible from the various tropical complaints they would be treating for they had no natural immunity and, in the absence of modern pharmacy, particularly antibiotics, efficient and vigilant nursing was to a great extent the only thing that could make the difference between life and death for their patients.

Therefore, I would argue that, although the emphasis on hygiene in the training and lived experience of nurses in the colonial tropics did serve to segregate them from their patients, whether expatriate or indigenous, the reasons for it were intensely practical and prudent. For the nurses themselves, it was rather an important part of their professional lives at a time when the health benefits of personal hygiene were only gradually becoming known. Maintaining their own high standards of hygiene was not only served as a measure of self-protection but also provided an example of good practice for whatever community they served. In order to do this affectively, a degree of segregation was inevitable but from the nurses' point of view, it was certainly not primarily in order underpin the colonial hierarchy and create social distinction.

Chapter 6 – Wives and mothers

In the preceding two chapters, I have used my research on women working professionally as doctors and nurses to contradict Maugham and Orwell's pejorative stereotypes of the British women. In this chapter, I turn to the women closest to those who, in my opinion, were unjustly caricatured by the authors i.e., to women who were part of the colonial society because their marriages took them there.

Scholarly views of colonial wives

Margaret Strobel (1991: 13) attributes the negative characteristics that seem to define the stereotypical colonial wife as stemming from 'her acting out a female role in a system organised around the male role'. Indeed Gartrell (1984: 167) had previously described the Colonial Service as a predominantly male body of employees, hierarchically organised, where a wife was considered to be part of the 'total person' of the male colonial servant and implied that they were to an extent 'invisible' as women. The object of this chapter will be to demonstrate, by examining closely and critically, the lived experience of several colonial wives, the ambiguous nature of their positions within the colonial community, which they needed to be able to negotiate proactively and successfully. By listening to their voices via their letters, memoirs and other archival documentation, I challenge the masculine-led stereotypic view of the memsahibs of Malaya and Burma as two-dimensional, vacuous, and passive by allowing them to be judged on their own merits, rather than through the lens of the inevitably derisory and demeaning chauvinistic presuppositions of Orwell, Maugham and others like them.

As I have noted in earlier chapters of this thesis, relatively little has been written about these women who lived in Malaya and Burma during the interbellum years of the twentieth century. Therefore I trawled the archives of the India Office at the British Library, the National Archives (Kew), the Bodleian Library (Oxford), and the National Archives of Singapore, with the intent of 'finding' these women. They are there to be found but, in many cases, their papers are subsumed within those of their husbands and whereas the records and reminiscences of the male colonial officer are copious and often cover his entire career, those of his wife are random and indiscriminate – often consisting of odd scraps of diaries or household ledgers, copies of letters home and – very occasionally – a few pages of memoirs. This lack of rigour suggests that the colonial historians and record keepers thought the lives of the British wives of these colonies were barely worth recording and certainly not in their own right.

However, once the adumbrations they did leave had been pieced together, it becomes apparent to me that this lack of written material is due to the fact that, whereas their husbands' work, although rigorous, was to a great extent predictable and increasingly left a paper trail of official reports, documents and memoranda, the women were leading extremely busy lives, entailing a wide variety of activities which left little time for documentation as they provided the informal 'support network' for the imperial lifestyle which because of lack of documentation makes them shadowy figures in the masculine dominated colonial archives.

At the start of this chapter I break down the domestic lives of these women into several categories suggested by what Susan Maushart (2003) describes as 'wifework'. This entails the formal/ceremonial aspects of these women's lives which frequently included official entertaining and attendance at and planning of ceremonial occasions and the domestic/home management which comprised not merely the management of

family budgets, supplies and staff, but the emotional labour that childbirth and raising of children as well as coping with illness both in the immediate family and among the staff and estate labourers entailed. I then examine philanthropic and humanitarian activities, some of which were apparently driven by their own interests, and which frequently brought them into meaningful engagement with the local people. I also examine the feelings of connection these women had with local women, particularly through the medium of childcare and motherhood and their views regarding their female compatriots.

The role of the wife and 'wifework' both in the wider colonial society and in the home

The perception of the wife both in the metropolitan and the colonial society of the interwar years was a somewhat paradoxical one, and much of the contradiction sprang from the incongruencies in the aftermath of the First World War. On one hand, the active part played by many women both at home and abroad during the war years had certainly contributed to the swell of support for women's enfranchisement in 1928 and this, combined with the huge losses on the battlefields meant that many women who would ordinarily have expected to marry, instead were left to live single lives and support themselves.

However, this generation of single women, pejoratively designated 'surplus women' were viewed by the still essentially male dominated social and political hierarchy as a possible social and political threat and, as a result, in post-war Britain, women were being encouraged to 'give up work and make home for heroes'.They were also encouraged to emigrate to the settler colonies, particularly Canada and Australia as the poster below indicates:

Figure 5. Poster promoting British migration Australia, the land of opportunity, 1928. Source: National Archives of Australia <https://www.naa.gov.au/students-and-teachers/learning-resources/learning-resource-themes/society-and-culture/migration-and-multiculturalism/australia-land-opportunity-poster-promoting-british-migration>

The poster calls for British women and girls to migrate to Australia specifically calling for 'women for the home'. Women were thus particularly encouraged to become wives and mothers to support and 'grow' the white settler colony. That many would need to work initially was recognised but equally it was assumed that this would probably take the firm of domestic service. Consequently, between 1926 and 1930 the Australian and British governments jointly funded a specialised centre in Market

Harborough, England, to train women for domestic service prior to migration to Australia.

The governmental call for women to embrace the role of wives and mothers and the schemes to bring wives to the male 'pioneers' of the settler colonies clarify the official attitude towards the supposed threat to the continuation of the supremacy of marriage from an overabundance of single women who were showing themselves capable of achieving both social and financial independence within the post-war society. Running parallel to this and in some ways supporting it, was the growing science of birth control, embodied in the work of Marie Stopes (1918).

Although superficially the rise of birth control appears to underpin the growing independence of women in that, to an extent, it allowed them to take charge of their own fertility, it is essential to recognised that this agency was invariably positioned within the state of marriage. Marie Stopes's seminal work, *Married Love* (1918), although purporting to recognise that sexual pleasure is part of a normal, healthy, physical appetite, none the less denies it to the single of either sex. She encouraged men and women to marry as early in order that sexual satisfaction may be enjoyed by both sexes, without the lottery of accidental pregnancy, during a long and faithful partnership. Stopes' advice to single men and women in this regard exposes the gender divide in that celibacy for men is seen as unnatural and therefore best guarded against by early marriage whereas for women, it is viewed as a dormant, passive state that can, if necessary, be sublimated in work in the caring professions such as nursing or childcare. It seems Stopes's work was read by both the married and the unmarried, and occasioned many pleas for advice. Hhowever, it is pertinent to note that if she answered queries from single women at all (and she frequently didn't), she always

advised celibacy until marriage, even attempting to matchmake, with varying degrees of success among some of her correspondents (Holden 2003 484).

Contemporary views of the role of the wife in the interwar years in the colonies in question

The modern feminist, Susan Maushart (2001: 18), has defined 'wife-work' as the 'unwritten contract a woman enters at marriage that commits her to bearing the lion's share of maintaining the success of the marriage in almost all practical, domestic, and emotional areas. The women whose lived experiences provide the backbone for this chapter would not have instantly identified with this definition, but I argue that , by examining their lives through the critical lens of history, they exemplify the definition.

The following article from the *Straits Times* in September 1937 certainly offers an interesting impression of the patriarchal attitude towards the qualities required to make a woman 'marriage worthy' during this period. I quote it in its entirety as I consider it encapsulates an attitude which is a major contributor to the negative and opprobrious perceptions of the 'wife' role at that time.

> **Golden qualities all girls should have by Raymond Lindgren**
>
> A lovely girl is an accident, but a distinguished woman is an achievement! Not that she must be lovely or distinguished to be worthy of a wedding ring, a husband or a home. But there are certain golden qualities that she must have before she is.
>
> Firstly, is her character fundamentally sound? To put it plainly is she honest, sympathetic, reliable and unselfish?
>
> If she is secretive or deceptive in small ways, she is being dishonest. White lies now mean blacker ones later. If she is the sort who isn't concerned over the comfort and well-being of friends, if she can't sense their joys and disappointment and adapt herself accordingly, she will soon become unsympathetic towards her constant companion – her husband.

Also, if she cannot say that she keeps promises and carries out to the finish at least minor responsibilities, then she could not hold long that specialised job of wife.

As for selfishness, that characteristic is sure dynamite to married bliss. For marriage, more than anything else, demands sacrifice and tolerance.

In being so blunt about the next qualities, I am merely trying to emphasise their pertinence; I don't mean to be impertinent.

Whether a girl is pretty or striking doesn't matter so much to a man as those qualities which might be put in the form of this question: 'Are you clean, sweet, natural, tidy?' A clean body, a sweet disposition, a natural unaffected air, an immaculateness of dress and habit – all of these are necessary assets which a woman should possess if she is trying make herself worthy of that man-ideal she hopes will one day sweep her off her feet.

Men dislike sloppily dressed women because that usually means they would be just as careless and untidy about the house.

And her clothes closet – does it look like a rummage sale in a high wind? The slovenly girl will find it hard to change her habits all at once.

This next question is more important than one might think. Can she, without overtaxing her nervous system or her friends' digestions, cook a decent meal? It isn't necessary to be a chronic home body or an economics graduate, but at least she should be able to make sure she knows the bare facts of the art before taking a husband.

Has she any outside interests or hobbies? Can she keep up her end of the conversation? She must be an alive, vital person to be in the running these days.

Another thing she should be able to do is to play the strenuous part of the hostess and make different 'types' feel at ease together.

She most certainly should, if she hasn't already, acquaint herself with the physical responsibilities of marriage.

Lastly, but so important, has she always given freely of her love and affections? Because if she hasn't up till now had kindly thoughts about her friends, if she doesn't love those close to her, this marriage business may turn out to be a bitter mistake.

If a girl can answer these questions with a fervent 'Yes' then I say to her 'You're worth marrying.'

Viewed through the reverse telescope of history, I found this article appalling in its arrogance, condescension, and blatant male entitlement. However, a close reading demonstrates not only these general characteristics but also an engrained set of patriarchal values that would have coloured the world within which the women examined in this chapter would have had to negotiate their position.

In the initial paragraph, the author describes a woman as needing certain attributes to be 'worthy a wedding ring, a husband or a home', thus immediately quantifying women by implying they must match up to some pre-ordained male-engendered ideal to make themselves 'worthy'. This ideal is then broken down into a series of attributes and characteristics such as tidiness, cleanliness, honesty, and selflessness. In addition to this she should be a good housekeeper, an adequate cook, a generous and sympathetic hostess and a good conversationalist. Finally, she should have acquainted herself with the demands of the physical side of marriage – the assumption being that she should also be a virgin on marriage. Only if she can honestly say she can fulfil all these demands, should she consider she is 'worthy of that man-ideal she hopes will one day sweep her off her feet' and to be considered by the (male) author 'worth marrying'.

Absurd and demeaning though the above article may seem today, another, again published in the *Straits Times* in March 1938, but syndicated from an Australian newspaper, gives ten-point guide to what a study among young Australian women considered to be the most important criteria for success as a wife. They are as follows:

1. *Keep her husband's house in order within the bounds of his means.*
2. *Do the washing and cooking and take an interest in her husband's work.*
3. *Raise a family.*

4. *Place her own health first for the sake of her husband and children but never become a food addict or a sufferer from imaginary ailments.*
5. *If she has servants, treat them well and never complain about them to her husband.*
6. *Cultivate a good temper.*
7. *Read books and newspapers – maintain an interest in the outside world.*
8. *Keep herself attractive and neat – no old slippers and housecoats when he comes home from work.*
9. *Never become a social snob.*
10. *Never nag.*

A careful reading of both sets of criteria demonstrate that although the first is written by a man and couched in chauvinist language, the second, written for and by women actually mirrors many of the perceived necessary qualities women themselves felt they needed to demonstrate in order to be successful wives.

There seem to be obvious connections between this contemporaneous and to modern eyes somewhat offensive summation of the characteristics of the wife and Maushart's definition of wife-work. The women to whom both articles were addressed were urged to see themselves as candidates to provide practical, domestic and emotional support for the innately superior male should he consider them worthy of the honour of an offer of marriage. What is more, their success in this supportive role would be measured entirely by those who are supported thus identifying them as subordinates without self-identity.

At a more colloquial level, Dr Elizabeth Sloan-Chesser writing in the *Straits Times* in September 1939, concludes an article with the recommendation that 'To achieve health and happiness for the men of the family, the housewife must herself attain the highest vitality possible, serenity of mind which is best achieved by mental exercise, using the brain you have to the maximum', i.e., she should use her brain, not

merely for her own intellectual enjoyment but more importantly, to ensure the men of her family are happy and healthy.

Another article in the same newspaper, printed in December 1939, reports on a Health Education Committee conference at the University of London and is entitled 'Girls cannot all have Clarke Gable'. The main guidance emerging from the conference was that all girls should be given a thorough education in botany and biology, not because that learning more of these sciences is an intellectual end in itself but to best equip them for 'the great job of her life – marriage and family rearing'.

This brief analysis is intended to demonstrate the somewhat paradoxical perception of the role of the wife in the interwar years. At the meta level, women arguably had more freedom socially and politically, and more control and agency over their own bodies and their reproductive capacities than ever before. However, the cataclysmic effect of the First World War on all levels in the societies of the West and its colonial offshoots, meant marriage became regarded as an essential bulwark in the maintenance of male dominance within the social order. This is reflected at the colloquial level, where informal advice given to women encourages them to see their role in life as the helpmeet and junior partner in companionate marriage.

The search for the women's voices

After much library and archive research time I discovered a selection of letters, diaries and other written evidence of several women who spent periods of their married lives in colonial Burma and Malaya and these have provided the primary sources for the analyses that follow. I found it both interesting and ironic that many of them were filed under a category known as 'Ephemera', a word which can be explained as 'something of no lasting value'.

These will be augmented by the experiences of wives and mothers that come to light in memoirs occasionally self-published by their husbands or children and, in one case, as a collection of short biographies collected by Australian academic, Jean Teasdale (1997). Like Teasdale, much of my motivation for undertaking this research is that very little attempt has been made to examine the lives and work of these women in terms of their lived reality so that the perception of them in general is still that of the two-dimensional, shallow parasite of Maugham and Orwell's stereotypic creations. I have used the research that inormed this section of my thesis to place the lived reality of these women front and centre in order that their true voices may be heard and allowing them to be viewed as something more than merely an acquiescent and subordinate part in the great colonial machine.

One of the most fruitful sources for my research came with an introduction through a mutual acquaintance to Mrs Mary Spender, whose parents were in Burma during the 1930s. Although Mrs Spender's father, A.J.S. White, who had entered the ICS, had published his own memoirs in 1991, and had lodged his papers with the British Library, her mother Joan's letters, diaries, photographs, and notebook were still with the family, and she very kindly allowed me unfettered access to them. At a private luncheon attended by Mary and her three older brothers, only one of whom had been partly raised, although not born, in Burma, it was clear that they all had great affection for both their parents and were delighted that their mother's life in Burma, as described in her personal papers, could contribute to my research. They felt strongly that women like their mother had been treated very unfairly by history generally, and Orwell in particular (who, they insisted, their parents had always referred to as Eric Blair), and that this was at least a step to putting the record right. Joan White's papers and her children's memories of her have provided me with vital evidence for this chapter.

Joan White

Joan White (neé Elston-Davies) came from a comfortable middle class background in the south of England. Her mother's first marriage had ended in divorce, and she had subsequently married Captain Rust of the Deccan Horse, Indian Army, who was then seconded to the Burma Military Police. Joan and her sister were brought out to Burma when they finished school and within the year she had met 'A.J.' (A.J.S. White), a rising star of the Burma branch of the ICS and an old acquaintance of her parents. They were married in the Cantonment Church in Rangoon on 7 December 1932. In this way, Joan White was typical of many middle class young women, in that she married straight from her parents' home without ever having lived independently. However, for both AJ and Joan, this was a love match, as can clearly be seen in AJ's many affection references to Joan in his memoirs, *The Burma of AJ* (1991). Their first child, Christopher, was born late in 1933. After his retirement from the ICS in 1937, Joan and AJ returned to the UK and four more children followed Christopher. AJ pursued a second career in the newly established British Council with Joan, yet again, as his helpmeet and support. She survived two episodes of cancer, one in 1974 and one in 1976, when the tables were turned and the now retired AJ nursed her. They remained devoted to each other until his death aged 95 in February 1991, after which Joan carried on alone in their home in Mere, Wiltshire, until her death aged 96, in July 2008.[46](White, A.J.S: 1990)

Ruth Donnison

[46] Joan always called her husband Stanley, his third Christian name as can be seen in any direct quotes from her writings.

A contemporary of Joan White's in her early years in Burma was Ruth Donnison, the wife of Vernon Donnison, a colleague of A.J. White in the ICS. I found Ruth's papers among those of her husband, again lodged at the British Library.[47] These are complemented by excerpts from a memoir she compiled but did not publish, parts of which are featured in the book David Donnison (2005) wrote about his parents. Ruth and Vernon had met and become friends as children when they attended the same primary school in North London, at which point neither family had any links to colonial service. Vernon's family were merchant stock and had, for several generations, run the premier stationers' supply stores in the City of London. Ruth was the granddaughter of Rabbi Simeon Singer, revered in the Reform and Liberal Jewish communities in Britain for having made an early translation of the Hebrew *siddur* (prayer book) into English. Her father, David Singer, was a successful businessman, despite having left City of London Boys' School at fifteen, and had married Isabel Isaacs, the daughter of wealthy family whose own father had tragically committed suicide following the death in childbirth of his young wife, when Isabel was a child. Mrs Singer's motherless childhood had not been a happy one and, consequently, she was aloof and unaffectionate with her own children. However, both Singer parents were determined that their daughters should receive the same education as their sons and, consequently, two years after Vernon Donnison started at Cambridge, Ruth Singer enrolled at Somerville College Oxford.(Donnison, D: 2005)

Ruth and Vernon's childhood friendship had matured during their days at boarding school – he at Marlborough, she at Wycombe Abbey – when they established a mutually supportive correspondence. When, on graduation, Vernon was successful in the entrance examinations for the ICS and received his posting to Burma, he

[47] British Library, Mss Eur B357.

proposed to Ruth, who after some soul searching and on the advice of her tutors at Somerville, who told her she could always continue her education later, abandoned her degree and followed him to Rangoon where they were married on the 2 December 1925. The Donnisons remained in Burma until the Japanese invasion in 1941 when Ruth and her younger child, Annis, were evacuated to Simla while Vernon remained behind, closing military and civilian bases as the Japanese advanced towards the border with India before eventually walking out over the Chin Hills (ibid).

Until her husband's arrival in India, Ruth's life in Simla was precarious and money was very short. She took the decision to put her daughter into boarding school in Darjeeling so that she could work among the streams of refugees crossing the border. She continued this work after Vernon's arrival when he was appointed to represent the Burmese Government in the Viceregal Government in Delhi. After the Japanese defeat in 1945, Vernon was asked to go back to Rangoon as Chief Secretary and a member of the Executive Council. He was unusual among the colonial executive in that he actively promoted rapid progression towards Burmese independence with Aung San as the acknowledged future leader.(Ibid)

In the pre-war years in Burma, Ruth had become increasingly interested in the establishment of a juvenile court system. Once re-established in the UK, Ruth was anxious to further her interests in probation services and the legal treatment of young offenders then known as juvenile delinquents. From the outset, this was with the intention of returning to Burma to develop the child services in which she had been involved before the war. In November 1943, just prior to leaving India, she was asked by the Reconstruction Department of the Government of Burma in Exile to undertake an investigation in the United Kingdom in the most recent developments in the treatment of juvenile delinquency and children's court work. In May 1944, and

established in the UK, she approached the India Office regarding discussions she had with Lt Col P.K. Tarapore of the Indian Prison Service (1936) where he had suggested this research with a view to establishing a probation service in the re-occupied Burma, and that she should consider returning to Burma in order to help in setting this up. However, it appeared that, since her conversation with Tarapore in India things had changed – there were Burmese students at the Tate Institute of Social Sciences in Bombay, being trained up to go out to Burma and as a certain Mrs Lovett-Horn, who was already a trained probation officer and who spoke Burmese was willing to lead the initiative, she had been asked to head up to operation and so, Ruth's services would not be required (Mss Eur B357).

Ruth continued her research into 1945 but no actual report seems to exist in the archives. I would speculate that, given the India Office's rather cavalier approach and their decision that any lead position on the development of the Burmese Probation Service is to go to Mrs Lovett-Horn, the final report was possibly never writte. However, Ruth's interest in the treatment and governance of Juvenile criminals continued. She became a Justice of the Peace in Berkshire after she and Vernon retired from Burma in 1946, and in 1962, during a trip by landrover they made from the UK to Burma, she produced a report for Napo – the trade unioin and professional association for family court staff's *Probation Journal* in September 1962 entitled, 'The Senior Approved School, Chingleput, Madras State, India' (R.S. Donnison :1962). Ruth Donnison died of cancer in 1968 aged 68.

Helen (Nell) Hughes

Nell (Helen) Hughes was another 'ICS wife'. Her husband, Thomas Lewis Hughes, progressed through the ranks of the ICS until, from 1939 to 1942 he became Political

Secretary to the Burma Chamber of Commerce and then, from 1942 to 1946, Secretary to the Governor-General. Nell, who escaped the Japanese invasion in 1942 by plane to Calcutta and then to Simla with her two babies, wrote and subsequently self-published an account of her life in Burma, *No Business in Camp,* (the draft of which was found among her husband's papers at the British Library(Mss Eur C640).

In deciding to call her account *No Business in Camp,* Nell is quoting from the memoirs of another British woman in India, writing in 1837, one Honoria Lawrence, who happened to be her great great-aunt. Honoria Lawrence wrote. 'A lady who shrinks from driving over rough and smooth, riding through a jungle or crossing a piece of water on the back of an elephant has no business in camp.' (ibid)

No Business in Camp provides a lively account of life as the wife of a District Officer first on the Lower Chindwin and subsequently in the Mandalay districts of Burma. Nell had been born in Varanasi in India in 1903. Her father, Major-General William Beynon, himself born at Agra in India in 1866, served as an officer in the Indian Army and was decorated for the successful subduing of the Masud Revolt on the North-West Frontier in 1917. Had she been born at any other time, Nell would almost certainly have been 'sent home' at around seven years old; however, the onset of the First World War and her father's military responsibilities prevented the family from travelling and, consequently, she spent her childhood and adolescence in India.

When her husband remarked, after their return to England that she looked on their life in Burma through rose-tinted spectacles, she writes:

> Perhaps I did, but for me there will always remain the memory of one morning after a gallop along the sandy bed of a 'chaung',[river} when the early mists were fighting a losing battle with the sun, and the forest was fresh and bright all

round, the Ashin-paya turned to me to say in an awestruck voice ‘and we’re paid to do this!’ (Hughes 1942: 2).

Enid Dawkins

(Frances) Enid Dawkins (nee Smythies) spent most of her married life in Burma, arriving as a bride in 1909 and leaving in 1937. She was born in 1889 as part of an Anglo-Indian family in Mussoorie, Dehradun, India, and in 1910 married Clinton Dawkins, a young officer in the Burma Forestry Service. Like most colonial wives she underwent the angst of sending each of her three sons ‘home’ to England when they were around six years old but she enjoyed her life in and around the Magwe Forestry District, taking a great interest in her husband’s work and the indigenous people with whom she was constantly in contact. By the time the Dawkins retired from Burma, Enid could speak, understand, and write Burmese fluently and could manage in several other local languages. (Mss Eur B357)

The four women introduced in the preceding paragraphs were all contemporaries in the world of colonial Burma in the 1920s and 1930s, and apart from Ruth’s Jewish roots, all came from very much the same upper middle class backgrounds; in fact, A.J. White and Vernon Donnison were contemporaries at Marlborough College. The husbands were known to one another and certainly, in the case of the White and Donnison families, became very good friends. The White brothers have very fond memories of attending ‘musical weekends’ with the Donnisons in Berkshire in the 1950s and 1960s. Vernon Donnison wrote the forward to Stanley’s A.J. White’s book, *The Burma of ‘AJ’*, and White was godfather to the Donnison’s son David. Although these men were posted to Burma, it should not be forgotten that, as mentioned earlier in the chapter, Burma at this point was still a province of the Indian

Empire and Vernon Donnison and Stanley 'AJ' White were recruited straight from Oxford and Cambridge respectively into the ICS or the 'heaven-born'.[48]

However, Malaya had never been a part, even a subordinate one, of the great Raj and was to some extent regarded as less prestigious by the metropolitan elite. In 1934, Nellie Grant wrote to Gervais Huxley that colonial society was being increasingly claimed by 'younger sons of Clapham and Surbiton plus their suburban wives and stuffy drawing rooms' (Bush 2004:91). As the 1920s and 1930s progressed colonial élites began blaming deteriorating race relations on the narrow views of suburban lower ranks wives who, it was felt, unable to take the heat or manage servants, were behaving in ways that were not designed to maintain the status quo and engender the respect a memsahib should be due (Bush 2004: 91-95).

Of the next three women, only one could be considered to come from outside the accepted social catchment for colonial wives. Ann Muriel Gammans and Margaret Leech (who was educated to degree level) were respectively the wife and sister of a colonial servants who, like many in the Malayan Civil Service in the 1930s had middle class grammar school backgrounds. Marian Firkins, however, came from an agricultural working class background and had left school aged twelve. Thus, it may be conjectured that background and class structure also form lenses through which these women and the societies of which they were part, judged themselves and each other.

Ann Muriel Gammans

[48] In British India: in the works of Rudyard Kipling, a British person, implying, sometimes ironically, exalted or very high status; (hence) a member of the ICS. Also members of the Indian Civil Service as a class.

Ann Muriel Gammans (nee Paul) was born in Hampshire in 1898 and in 1917, at the age of 19 married Leonard David Gammans, at that time an officer in the Royal Flying Corps who had survived 4 years in France. In 1920, Gammans joined the Colonial Service and was posted to Malaya where he spent the next 14 years rising through the ranks. After Malaya, the Gammans spent several years in the British Embassy in Tokyo before retiring to England where Leonard became Director and Secretary of the Land Settlement Association. He was elected as Conservative member of parliament for Hornsey in 1941, a seat he held until his death in 1957, and, in the resulting by-election, the seat was won by Ann Muriel, by then known as Lady Gammans following her husband's elevation to a baronetcy in 1956. (House of Commons Hansard Writing Team: 2022)

Ann Muriel represented the constituency of Hornsey until her retirement during the 1966 general election. Pertinently, in her maiden speech in November 1957, she spoke to the subject of the Commonwealth and Malaya's place within it. Her opinions seem dated today but the following quotation demonstrates her loyalty towards the country where she had spent so many years: 'It is often said, "Happy is the country which has no history", and if by that is meant the absence of feelings of bitterness and strife, then that can truly be said of Malaya in its formative years.'"[49]

She had already gained considerable experience in constituency matters by undertaking many of her husband's duties while he was serving as Assistant Postmaster-General in Winston Churchill's 1951–1955 government and was

[49] UK Parliament Hansard/Commons/ 8 November 1957 – Commons Chamber, Lady Gammans (Hornsey). Columns 516/517

reportedly more popular than her husband. This seems to be borne out by the fact that, in the 1959 general election, she matched her husband's majority (ibid).

During her time in Parliament, Ann Muriel was particularly active in the Inter-Parliamentary Union. Her domestic concerns were primarily local, including the wellbeing of pensioners and traffic problems in her constituency, and she was unafraid to oppose the Government when she felt it was in the interests of her constituents. She fought against proposals in 1963 to create Haringey Council by amalgamating the areas of Hornsey, Wood Green, and Tottenham, and repeatedly raised the subject of road safety on Highgate Hill in her constituency in the 1960s, advocating for an alternative approach to the one favoured by the Government (ibid).

Ann Muriel's diaries and notebooks concerning her time in Malaya are also classified within the confines of her husband's much larger archive in the National Archives of Singapore; however, once pieced together they provide a vivid, if at time critical, picture of life and her compatriots in colonial Malaya.

Margaret Leech

Margaret Leech (née Luckham), the daughter of a general practitioner in Salisbury, Wiltshire, was educated first at the Godolphin School and then at Reading University where she studied horticulture. In 1932, Margaret travelled to Malaya to keep house for her brother, Harold Luckham, who worked for the Malayan Civil Service, stationed in Penang. However, on her arrival, she found that during the time it had taken her to reach Penang, her brother had been transferred to Kota Bharu in Kelantan, one of the Unfederated Malay States on the more remote east coast of Malaya, towards the

Siamese (now Thai) border. It was here that she met her future husband, Bill Leech, who worked for Boustead and Co. Trading. They were married in Singapore as it was impossible to be married except by Muslim law in Kelantan and, after a honeymoon in a Sumatra hill station, they returned to Bill's rented home in the border town of Tumpat.

Margaret stayed in Malaya until the onset of the Japanese invasion when she and her two children were given passage on the ship, Empress of Asia, arriving back in England in January 1942, leaving Bill as a prisoner-of-war in Changi. At the close of the war, the Leechs returned to Malaya and stayed until Independence (Teasdale 1997: 93-97).

Marian Firkins

Marian Firkins (née Preen) was born in 1892. Her mother died when she was four and she spent much of her childhood with her grandparents in the Worcestershire countryside attending village schools. Like many of the agricultural working class, her education finished when she left school at the age of 12. Marian went into domestic work and, by her late teens was working as a nursery governess. However, towards the end of the First World War, the temptation of better pay in the factories engaged in war work lured her to a munitions factory in Birmingham where she rapidly rose to the highly responsible position of inspector of fuses.

Unfortunately for her, this job only lasted for six months, as the war had ended, and she and her female colleagues were 'let go' in order to free up jobs for men returning from the Front. Marian resisted her family's requests to return home and, instead, found a job in the Queen's Hotel, Liverpool. It was while she was working there that she first met her future husband, Charles Firkins, an ex-soldier who had just returned from India and who intended to go back to the Far East as soon as possible

with the intention of making his fortune. He wanted Marian to go with him, but she refused, and it was not until he returned in 1924 that they renewed their liaison, and they were married by special licence three weeks after he arrived (Teasdale 1997: 51–53).

By this time, Firkins was working as an auditor for the accountants McAuliffe, Davies & Hope and was about to leave for Malaya where he was to manage the accounting for the Caledonia rubber estate in Province Wellesley. Marian sailed from Birkenhead on 3 January 1925 and, after short stops in Singapore and Penang, arrived at the large rubber estate, where she was to live for the next five years.

Marian spent the following 15 years in Malaya firstly on the Caledonia estate and then on Penang, from where, following the Japanese invasion in December 1941, she was evacuated first to Singapore and then to Fremantle in Australia. She and her husband returned to Malaya for two years after the war before settling in Perth, Australia (ibid).

The place of the wife in colonial society

In the establishment of the home and the management of the household in the colonial setting, at a meta level, and to reinforce the colonial paradigm of gendered hierarchical order, this home needed to be seen as one of perfect harmony where the mistress of the house, through her 'wife work' is seen to manage her house and servants efficiently, calmly and fairly, just as her husband runs his district, department or plantation. Thus, the colonial home could be said to be a microcosm demonstrating the imperial ethos of organised domination of coloniser over colonised.

However, this uber-model intersects with that of the role of gender within the society. As I demonstrated in the posts from the *Straits Times*, earlier in this chapter,

women were still viewed as subordinate to men both in terms of their place within the domestic hierarchy of the European home where the main focus of the household was to provide domestic comfort for the master and, more widely, in the sense that the women was generally regarded as morally, physically and intellectually inferior to men.

Equally, Stoler (1989: 643) tells us that 'European women were essential to the colonial enterprise and the solidification of racial boundaries in ways that repeatedly tied their supportive and subordinate posture to community cohesion and colonial peace', indicating that through their necessary adherence to the strict codes of segregated sexual behaviour, even their sexuality was subject to the maintenance of the concept of colonial supremacy.

Thus, when I examine and discuss the accounts of home making and domestic life through the voices of the women themselves, I have considered them not only through each of these criteria described above but also as having to negotiate their position at the intersections of all of them.

The formal and ceremonial aspect of life for colonial wives

Gartrell (1984: 167) underpins my analysis by examining the social side of the wives of colonial officials and what was expected of them by both their husbands and the societies within which they lived. She makes the important point that within the patriarchal, hierarchical and predominantly male body of employees, wives were viewed merely as an adjunct to husbands. Therefore, a wife who could keep all the 'rules' and who supported the imperial ethos was viewed as an asset but her own personal and professional achievements prior to her marriage were irrelevant. Essentially, wives were a part, if an inferior one, of the machine designed to maintain 'the mystique of European superiority (which) was believed to be essential to the

maintenance of Imperial domination' (ibid.). Undoubtedly, one of the most important aspects of the maintenance of the successful Imperial paradigm was the execution of ceremonial performative acts such as celebrations of events that supported that myth.

Joan White, as the wife of a relatively senior member of the colonial administration, was obliged to take an active part in the organisation of the ceremonial and social life of colonial Rangoon. In her husband's memoirs we find her one day in the Ladies' Gallery of the Legislative Council for her husband's swearing-in ceremony, and the next day, dining at Government House after having attended the enthronement of the Bishop of Rangoon in the cathedral. By the end of the same week, she is assisting Lady Stephenson, the Governor's wife, to organise a tea party at Government House for a party of thirty Burmese ladies, 'Joan being rather good at that sort of thing' (White 1991: 201). Joan was in her early twenties at this point and running a large household as well as raising her first son, Christopher, who was at that point under a year old. She was not an official member of the Government House Staff, nor did she receive any remunaration for this work, but, as the wife of a senior Secretary to the Government of Burma, this was expected of her, and it would have affected her husband's reputation had she not been competent

Again, as AJ's wife Joan was expected to attend all ceremonial occasions in which her husband played a part and in January 1936, Joan writes of the visit of the Viceroy and Lady Linlithgow, to Rangoon. There was a very grand procession from the jetty to the City Hall and she describes how they all sat 'very reverently' (from undates letter in White private papers) in the City Hall for the Viceroy's speech and the Lord Mayor's address and how she 'suffered in long gloves'(ibid). The heat of Rangoon in February was debilitating and by the end of the viceregal visit Joan was exhausted and ill.

Another aspect of Joan White's 'wife work' involved situations she had to negotiate that resulted from the fact that she was the much younger wife of a senior official and therefore relatively young compared with the wives of her husband's colleagues, and frequently expected to take a prominent place at social events. She writes of a dinner for about 60 people at Government House on the 12 February 1937, where she is seated next to the Admiral of the Fleet for the India Station, General Sir Aylmer Hunter-Weston. She found him amusing company but was aware of the resentment of some of the other wives present regarding her seeming 'place of honour' (D. Donnison 2005: 390).

For Ruth Donnison, the encounter with the colonial social hierarchy began with her wedding, a very few days after her arrival in Rangoon. The wedding ceremony itself, a civil one, took place in the home of Mr and Mrs Reynolds, the Forestry Secretary, and his wife, may have been short and simple but the Reynolds were among the top rank of Burmese colonial society and the following reception was extremely formal and attended by the most senior members of the administration. Ruth wore a long, white, embroidered silk dress which her mother had insisted she took with her and together, she and Vernon cut their wedding cake. Ruth recalls the reception in her part of her son's book about his parents (Donnison, D.: 2005: 29).

> It was daunting to meet so many important people. The wives had come to assess what kind of woman was to join their ranks, but the men were more interested in local politics. We cut our wedding cake which my mother had had made for us; two tiers crowned by a white sugar elephant – her idea![50]

[50] Ibid p.29 NB: Mrs Singer , Ruth's mother, had this cake made in London and it travelled out to Burma with Ruth.

It was indicative of Mrs Singer's domineering character that, although not able to be physically present at the wedding she none the less arranged for this extravagant and conspicuous cake which was symbolically the centre of attention.

Vernon Donnison was District Officer for the Kyonpaw district of Bassein, and Ruth, once established in her new home, who had no background in the hierarchical social protocols when they visited of the district headquarters in Bassein, found this aspect trying. Luckily for her, the Donnisons' visits there were usually taken in the company of Fred Wemyss (Vernon's Chief of Police) and his wife Maud, with whom Ruth had travelled out to Burma and who became a sympathetic friend. Life in the colonial community in Bassein was far more formal than in Kyonpaw and dressing for dinner (long dresses and gloves for women and black tie or dress uniform for men) was obligatory. Ruth states:

> I was entirely unprepared for these formal gatherings, and did not know that, since I was a bride, and senior to Maud by reason of Vernon's service, I would be treated as the guest of honour and expected to decide the moment when all present would rise to say goodnight and go home. I would be seated beside our host, who seemed quite an elderly gentleman to me. Having no small talk and knowing nothing of the gossip of Bassein, I found conversation desperately difficult. Meanwhile, I could see Vernon and Fred engaged in lively chat at the foot of the table. After an appalling long evening at the home of the Deputy Superintendent of Police it dawned on me that I was expected to bring things to a close. We stumbled away amidst looks of exhaustion, frustration or relief all around us. Maud, who knew more about this world, helped to educate me in my social duties, but for years afterwards, my bowels would turn to water at the prospect of such occasions[1](Mss Eur B357).

[51] Mss Eur B357 –Donnison, Ruth Seruya, Unspecified, n.d.

Unlike Joan White, Ruth's role as Vernon Donnison's wife did not involve her being expected to 'work' as an unofficial social secretary and events organiser. However, in 1926, the Donnisons were told of a possible transfer from Bassein but, before they could leave a tax survey had to be completed. There was not enough time for this to be undertaken by one officer, so Ruth and Vernon divided the work between them and took half each. Ruth was accompanied by the head clerk who could translate for her as her Burmese was not yet proficient enough. She would work through the days, meeting with Vernon in the early evenings to collate information. This was the only example I found of a colonial wife unofficially undertaking part of her husband's administrative work. Of course, it may have happened more often but not been recorded; however, it is evident, both from their own letters and papers and from the book their son, David (Donnison 2005), wrote about them, that the Donnisons were a devoted couple and this cooperation is typical of their deep commitment to one another which was is a major feature of their life together both in Burma and beyond.

In the Donnison's next posting, Yenangyaung, Vernon gave Ruth an unpaid post as a part time clerk in his office and for a time her mornings were spent dealing with his correspondence by drafting his replies as far as she was able. In this post, she also had access to reports sent to and written by her husband, which she found very interesting. Undoubtedly, this was unusual, but it is undeniable evidence of the colonial wife undertaking not just 'wife work' but actual work – work for which her husband was paid – in order to assure her husband's promotion or support his position in the community. That Ruth Donnison undertook it willingly and found it interesting can only be regarded as a bonus.

In 1931, Ann Muriel Gammans, in Singapore, described how she was persuaded by Lady Clementi, the wife of Sir Cecil Clementi, the then Governor and

Commander-in-Chief of the Straits Settlements, to become involved in the creation of an ‘International Women’s Club’ in Singapore. Lady Clementi was anxious to establish a multi-ethnic, philanthropic association for women that was not based on religious practice and encouraged Gammans to attend meetings of her ‘Womens’ Service League’. Gammans will later be revealed as a far more critical member of the shadow hierarchy of the colonial wives than Joan White or Ruth Donnison, but even she accepted this as her responsibility as the wife of a colonial officer (Mss Eur Brit. Emp. s. 506 : Singapore).

Domestic and home management

One of the major challenges facing the colonial wife in the Southeast Asia in the 1920s and 1930s, was to maintain her smoothly running evocation of English home life in the face of the tropical climate. Joan White, living in Rangoon at the end of February 1937 had to deal with average temperatures of between 80º and 90°F and considered having a ‘heated room’ installed to prevent all fabrics and linens growing mould overnight. By April, the Whites had moved to a better house on Prome Road. Brick built rather than timber and far more modern, this house had contemporary plumbing and a wide veranda where they could sleep outside during the hot weather which was fast approaching with temperatures reaching 104 to 105°F in the shade during the middle of the day. Despite the extreme heat, with most of the European population in the cooler climate of the hill station of Maymyo, the Whites enjoyed a peaceful time in a Rangoon full of quiet and flowering trees. In one of her letters to her mother-in-law, Jean described a typical day:

> This weather does not encourage much entertaining or going about. As we are sleeping out, we get up soon after six. We have out ‘Chota’ [little) tea, toast and

> fruit at a table on the veranda in our dressing gowns and then Stanley goes down and works at his desk for a bit while I go for a walk or trot about the house looking for dust or making laundry lists etc. Christopher and Nanny go for their walk about 6.15 am and I go with them sometimes. I bath after my walk and Stanley [A.J.] baths about 9.15 am. We have breakfast at about 9.30 or 9.45. Stanley goes off to the office about 10.30 and gets back at about 5.00 pm. I generally sleep in the afternoons now as it's too hot to do much else. After tea, Stanley gets out of his office suit (palm beach with a collar and tie – most stupid idea, making men wear such hot clothes in an office) and puts on khaki shorts and an open necked shirt and we go for a walk or go along to the swimming baths unless we have any tennis arranged. When we get in, we bath and change and get into something cool and sit in the garden until bedtime, only entering the house for dinner (White private papers :Letter dates 22 April 1937).

By the beginning of May, Joan was looking forward to listening to the live radio broadcast of the Coronation of King George VI on the 12 May. However, she and A.J. could no longer dine on their veranda because of the 'constant rain' of flying beetles, grasshoppers and mosquitoes – she even found a lizard, which she insists is '*a*s big as a young crocodile', on her dressing table (ibid).

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Ruth Donnison's first house in Burma was in the Bassein district of Kyonpaw and was made entirely of wood and bamboo, standing on stilts with wide shaded verandas on all sides. There was no plumbing or electricity, and bathing involved the *mandi*[52] method. They had a bathroom each as was the custom and a well had been dug in the compound, from which water was brought up in stone *mandi* jars by the sweeper who also removed, cleaned, and disinfected with Jeyes fluid the pans from the 'thunderboxes', disposing of the contents in the deep latrines dug at the edge of the compound. Ruth thought this an admirable system, in fact, in many ways superior

[52] *Mandi* (IMalay: bathe/shower) – involves standing in shower or bathing area, on a floor with a drain and ladling water with a dipper from a large jar or bucket to wash.

to London plumbing.[53] Vernon had provided basic furniture, which was made by the inmates of Bassein gaol and there were woven cotton rugs on the floor and a few pictures hung on the bamboo walls. There were no windows, just matting panels hinged at their upper edges which could be propped open with sticks to allow a flow of fresh air through the house. Ruth loved this house and, according to her son, remembered it as 'one of the happiest and most charming houses they ever had' (Donnison D.: 2005, 55)

Ruth took up the domestic reins of the household, keeping careful accounts. Tinned butter, tinned milk, coffee, tea, cocoa, marmalade, jam, dried fruits, tinned meat, drinks, and cleaning products all had to be ordered from Rangoon and took three months to arrive. Everything else was bought daily by the cook from the local markets and she soon became accustomed to the daily presentation of his accounts, containing his 'cut' [fee] the top, which, so long as it was not outrageous, she was willing to pay. (Mss Eur B357)

In their second posting to Yenangyaung, in the centre of the Burmese oilfields, the house they were allocated proved to be uninhabitable on arrival. Luckily, the office was closed for a few days because of a holiday and so 'Vernon and I and the rest of our household all got down to scrubbing and cleaning the place from top to bottom. After that, we unpacked our few possessions, I made some curtains for the windows and we felt we could call this a home' (ibid.).

Unlike Joan White and Ruth Donnison, Helen Mary (Nell) Hughes had been born and raised in India and might therefore have been somewhat more sanguine about the vicissitudes of the Burmese climate. She recounts how, as a young, newly married woman, she went about setting up a comfortable if simple home which lacked

[53] Mss Eur B357 –Donnison, Ruth Seruya, Unspecified, n.d.

both running water and electricity, and establishing a working domestic routine on a relatively limited budget, certainly giving the impression of a woman with agency who was by no means overwhelmed by both the society she had to settle or its demanding geographic location.

The Hughes were based at Monywa in the Sagaing area, 136 km northwest of Mandalay. Monywa was considered a remote posting by the standards of the ICS. However, on their arrival, the young couple were not allocated a house in the British compound but had to find their own accommodation in the town. Nell describes their first house as 'very simple with insects in the corners and bats in the roof' and is amused by the 'saloon style doors' in the bedrooms which offer very little privacy. However, she quickly engaged an 'excellent Head Boy', Maung Sein, and together they got the house organised (Mss Eur C640).

The following description of the household and the daily routine gives a clear and unambiguous picture of life in the Hughes' establishment. Maung Sein employed a cook and a 'No. 2 Boy' who also acted as water carrier. An Indian sweeper was engaged to deal with night-soil but the Hughes had no gardener or groom. Theirs was considered a small household by the standards of the ICS but Thomas Hughes' salary would not allow for a larger one. A typical day in the life of this wife of a junior colonial civil servant was outlined as follows:

06.00 Wake – tea and fruit on the veranda while Thomas deals with clerical work while it is still cool. I frequently go for an early morning ride.
07.30 Bathe and change
09.30–10.00 Breakfast. (Typically soup/porridge, river fish, papaya, custard apples, mangosteens, baal[54] fruit and bananas although Sunday morning

[54] *Aegle marmelos* – Baal fruit are not dissimilar to large hard shelled passion fruit. They are native to India and Southeast Asia and can be eaten fresh or dried. They are also considered to have medical properties.

breakfast also includes mulligatawny soup, chicken breast, rice and gula melaka)[55]

10.30 Thomas leaves for his Office while I meet with the Cook to discuss the day's menu. (She would provide him with money for marketing – expecting to pay a little more which the cook expects as his 'squeeze') – while the No. 2 Boy tidies and dusts the bedroom and hangs the bedding to air.

15.00 The hottest part of the day when I would rest having taken a *mandi* shower

18.00 Walk along the river as the evening becomes a little cooler (Hughes 1942: 40).

Nell recounts how keen she was for her first dinner party to be well received so she decked the tables with candles which were promptly blown out by the punkah fan. Sadly, she had to resort to a table laid on the veranda lit by malodourous paraffin lamps which made the occasion slightly less elegant than she had hoped (Mss Eur C640).

Enid Dawkins spent most of her married life in Burma in and around the Magwe district in the centre of the country, where her husband was Forestry Officer. Magwe is roughly halfway between Rangoon and Mandalay and although the temperature could vary from 59ºF to 104ºF over the course of the year, and the short summer could be brutally hot, it was not as subject to heavy monsoon-type rains typical of the rest of Burma.

Enid was extremely practical and ensured her family was as self-sufficient as possible, given the fact that they were equally far from Rangoon and Mandalay and supplies took weeks to reach them by river. She kept goats for milk so that Colyear, her third child, who was born in Burma and was the only one at home at the time of her memoirs, the older two having already been sent home to boarding school, could

[55] A pudding of Malay origin, made with sago and palm sugar.

have Horlicks[56] 'twice a day – he doesn't like it much!' and she made most of her own and Colyear's[57]clothes. She thoroughly enjoyed shopping for materials in the bazaar and was tempted to buy too much because there is such a wide choice of patterns and colours (Mss Eur D391).

Life was not always easy, however, and her husband's wages only barely covered their reasonably modest living expenses as the following budget sheet shows (ibid).

Written on the 6 July 1925
Enid Dawkins' average monthly expenditure (in rupees)

Income Tax		81
Regular payment towards grant for passages out to Burma		79
Draft to guardians for upkeep and school fees for two sons already in England at school		573
	Sub total	**733**
House rent		103
Board		184
Garden and stables		95
Servants' wages		211
Husband's clothes		13
Enid and Colyear's clothes		12
Sundries (postage, books)		55
	Sub-total	**673**
	Total	**1406**

Clinton Dawkins was paid. R1,435 per month.

[56] A sweet, malted milk powder that is mixed with hot milk. In Enid's day, it was marketed as a nutritional supplement and said to 'help night starvation' – a completely fictitious ailment invented by Glaxo.

[57] John Colyear Dawkins – the youngest of her three sons, he studied botany at Oxford and became District Forest Officer in the northern district of Acholi in Uganda. He later returned to Oxford and became an expert on the management of tropical high forest and a Fellow of St John's College.

Ann Muriel Gammans spent most of her time in Malaya living either in urban Singapore or Kuala Lumpur. She wrote almost nothing about her domicile and, because she lived in a urban situation, may well not have faced the practical problems of the ladies in Burma. However, she described in detail a day in her life in Kuala Lumpur in 1933 which certainly seems to be at odds with the stereotypical version of the colonial wife's life as languid and apathetic.

Early morning:

- Went to book a table for the Bal Masque to be held that evening at the Selangor Club.
- Went to Batu Road to have shoes recovered then to "Puloomals' to get the material to cover them in.
- To Whiteaways to buy material for a ruff.
- To Robinsons for a petticoat.
- The J. Little's for red wine
- To Naima Mahommed's for food
- To the market for chicken, fruit, eggs and vegetables
- To Cold Storage for fresh strawberries and cream

Home by 11.00 am

- Made salmon mousse and quick mayonnaise with pickles
- Drew five chickens, cut them up and rubbed them in oil – marinaded them in tomato/curry sauce and started them off as a casserole in the oven.
- Made salads and papaya dish.

Changed frock and drove to collect Len (husband) from his office

- On the way home picked up English papers at the Library.
- Lunch (cold cuts)

After lunch, brief rest

- Arranged flowers

- Sorted out table clothes and napery
- Opened chicken soup and peas [presumably canned?)
- Warmed up chicken casserole
- Prepared strawberries and cream
- Get coffee service and chocolates prepared
- Bathe and change
- 20:30 Guests start to arrive (Mss Eur. Brit.Emp. s. 506/Box 2 (2) 1928)

If one compares Ann Muriel Gammans' day with that of Nell Hughes mentioned earlier, it quickly becomes apparent that they lived very different lives. Nell's day, in her small settlement in central Burma, appears very much more relaxed and tranquil than Ann Muriel Gammans' busy urban life. However, Nell was functioning as mistress of a household with few if any modern conveniences in a sparsely populated rural area while Ann Muriel's day could almost have described that of a middle-aged housewife in the home counties – with the possible exception of the five chickens she guts herself.

For Marian Firkins, arriving in Malaya in February 1925, the contrast between her early life in service, then in factory work and finally in hotel work, and her married life as wife of the plantation accountant on the old Damansara sugar estate that, because of the sugar slump, had been turned over to rubber, must have been extreme. However, she seems to have viewed the change with pragmatically. In her interview with Jean Teasdale (1997: 51–61), she remembers her first home as 'a very pretty little two storey building made of timber' (ibid.: 54). Notwithstanding, she described herself as 'bored stiff' to start with, so she took to sewing, making curtains, cushion covers, and most of her own clothes and became much happier. She employed three servants who came from the 'coolie lines'[58] each day and she remarked on how well trained they

[58] Rows of houses built to accommodate coolies or wage labourers. In this case, house servants for the various estate bungalows would also have lived here.

were. Like most of the estate labourers, they were Indian indentured workers. Her cook bought fresh items in the local market, but all canned and preserved goods came from Pritchard's in Penang, sent down regularly to Port Wellesley where they were.

The estate bungalows had no running water and fresh water came on bullock carts with each household allowed two kerosene cans every day, although Marian and her Chinese amah had a scheme where she would chat to the driver of the cart and persuade him to let her have more for the baby's bath. Water for washing came from the river and was carried to the house by the *tukanayer* (sic)[59] and bathing was accomplished by the *mandi* method, while washing was collected and washed in the river by the *dhobi*.[60]

An excerpt from Marian's memories of her life as a new bride on this remote rubber estate seems to demonstrate her realistic approach to her new surroundings:

> All I had to do was look out onto this white heat. Not a leaf moved, and I used to think 'Well, I don't know about all this' and the perspiration would be dripping from me although I was doing nothing (Teasdale 1997: 54).

Margaret Leech's first house after her marriage in 1933 was in Tumpat, where her husband, Bill, worked as an agent for Boustead and Co.[61] It was a wooden house on stilts with a thatched roof and in the monsoon, the water from the adjacent river mouth would wash in under the house. Their domestic water came from a brackish well and had to be boiled and strained. As has already been noted, most colonial households employed a minimum of five servants, but Margaret and Bill Leech

[59] The *tukanayer* was the 'waterboy'.
[60] The *dhobi* was the washerman or woman.
[61] Boustead and Co. was one of the great trading houses, based in Singapore but with branches all over Southeast Asia.

managed with one Malay houseboy, who had worked for Bill before his marriage. Margaret relates how, once the houseboy knew his boss was engaged to be married to the sister of the local District Officer, he took it upon himself to 'spend a week in Kota Bharu in my servants' quarters observing me, before returning to Bill to tell him "She would do"' (Teasdale 1997: 94).

Family health and child rearing

Possibly the most important responsibility within the homemaker role, that fell to the colonial wife at this time was the maintenance of the family's health. This entailed ensuring that the family followed the best contemporary advice regarding diet and lifestyle, diagnosing and taking the appropriate action when family members fell ill and supervising and, in many cases, carrying out suitable nursing.

For the woman establishing a family home in the colonies of Malaya and Burma it was essential that she be able to deal not only with her immediate family's illness and accidents but also those to which her domestic and/or plantation staff were subject. Some women undertook First Aid and basic nursing courses prior to leaving the UK to equip themselves for this, while others relied on textbooks written specifically to advise on medical matters overseas.

One of the most popular of these was *The Home and Health in India and the Tropical Colonies* by Dr Kate Platt (1923). Dr Platt had qualified in London in 1904 and was the first Principal of the Dufferin Hospital in Calcutta. In 1916, she was appointed head of the new Lady Hardinge Medical College for Women in Delhi. Although forced to retire from the Indian Service in 1921 because of ill health, she continued to lecture and take an active part in the promulgation of women's health throughout the interwar

years. Her book was written specifically for women who would have no other source of advice when setting up home in the tropics for the first time.

The first section of the book gives detailed advice on how to deal with social and domestic matters like choosing a house (or the most clement situation in which to build one if that was necessary), running an efficient household, and establishing a daily routine, collecting a suitable wardrobe, and ensuring a comfortable 'voyage out'. The second section is devoted to childcare; what is necessary in the nursery, suitable food and feeding routines to maintain child health, how to deal with typical infant maladies and how to recruit and manage domestic servants to help with childcare. The final section deals with infection, its carriers and how to avoid it, tropical and other infectious diseases, tropical skin complaints, how to deal with bites and stings, the maintenance of the mother's health, and how to establish an efficient medicine cabinet. Dr Platt strongly advised that every household should also have a copy of *Home Nursing and First Aid*, issued by the Indian branch of the St John's Ambulance, and adapted for use in India.

The advice given in Platt's book is clear, practical, and based on contemporary medical theory regarding maintenance of good health in a tropical climate. For the wife wanting more colloquial help, local newspapers such as the *Straits Times* and the *Penang Chronicle,* ran frequent articles on health and welfare, some written locally and some syndicated, usually from the UK or Australia. 'Health and the Kitchen' appeared in the *Penang Gazette* in April 1925, in which readers were encouraged to send cooks on courses to teach them basic kitchen hygiene, considered to be essential for maintaining good health and the aforementioned Dr Elizabeth Sloan-Chesser (1937) enjoined wives to 'Keep your Husband Healthy' by ensuring he eats a nutritious breakfast and a good nourishing meal in the evening every day including

vegetable soups and fruit. In the doctor's opinion, 'Men are not mice, but many of them are never quite fit. They are depressed, sallow, irritable, constipated, because they have not sufficient milk, vegetables and fruit in their daily diet.'

Running alongside these articles, many newspapers included a 'problems' page. In the *Straits Times,* in the 1920s and '30s, this was titled 'Our Inquiry Bureau' where informal guidance could be found for wives with more mundane problems, such as how to deal with childish tantrums, what to do if a toddler is refusing foods he formerly enjoyed and how to nurse a baby through whooping cough.

Two things become clear from my examination of both the more formal forms of advice on healthcare and how to deal with illness in tropical colonies and the everyday discourse extant in the press. Firstly, a young woman who arrives as a new wife in the colony needs to educate herself, if she has not already done so, in order take responsibility for the family's health. It also becomes obvious that her husband must be her priority; as A.C of Alor Star writes in the *Straits Times* in May 1935:

> There is nothing which so settles the turbulence of a man's nature as is union with a high-minded girl … the true wife is a staff to lean on in times of trial and difficulty and she is never wanting in sympathy and solace when ill health or distress occurs or fortune frowns.

For Joan White these responsibilities started even before her marriage. A month before the wedding and while she and her mother were visiting A.J. in his district headquarters at Thayetmyo (Burma), he was taken ill with what was thought to be a duodenal ulcer. He was sent down to hospital in Rangoon where a month's rest with a 'milk diet' was prescribed. This he undertook back in Thayetmyo with Joan in

attendance. The following quote from A.J.'s memoirs is a good description of the duties she was expected to carry out both then and for the rest of her married life in Burma.

> It was a miserable business but made bearable by Joan, whose attitude throughout was wonderful. She might well have felt some misgivings at the discovery that she had a sickly (and nearly middle aged) fiancé on her hands … Joan kept remarkably cheerful and concentrated on looking after me and my diet which she did with the greatest efficiency'(White 1991: 188).

In fact, by the beginning of December (the wedding was planned for 7 December in Rangoon Cathedral) the service was very nearly relocated, due to the groom doubting he had the strength to undergo a formal church service in the heat of Rangoon and an alternative civil service was arranged which would have taken place at the home of Mr & Mrs Prior (he was Head of the Bombay-Burmah Company and she was Chief Guide for the Girl Guide Movement in Burma). However, the Right Reverend NormanTubbs, the Bishop of Rangoon, persuaded A.J. that he could not deny his young bride the happy memory of a church wedding and so they were married in the Cantonment Church in Rangoon although chairs were provided so that they did not have to stand at the altar (ibid).

They had been due to honeymoon in Tavoy, where A.J. had been stationed and which was an area he loved. Because of his illness, they sailed at once for the UK, with Joan nursing her new husband throughout the journey and ensuring he kept to his prescribed milk diet. Indeed, Joan was to spend a good part of her early married life worrying about and dealing with her husband's relatively frequent bouts of illness. (ibid) However, it was not only A.J. who suffered from recurring health problems. By the beginning of 1935, Joan, A.J. and their young son, Christopher were installed in Rangoon, where A.J. is to work in the Secretariat. They arrived on 10 January and six

days later, Joan was running a temperature of 104°F, feeling, in her own words ‘awful’. She had contracted measles and had ‘measles spots coming out in hundreds, eyes leaking, chest tight, m.outh foul’ (White private papers : letter dated March 1935)

She was bed bound until 24 January and her sickroom subsequently had to be fumigated. Her little boy had been sent to stay with friends to avoid infection but a few days later, she felt it was safe to bring him back.

By April in the same year and by now in the hill station of Maymyo (now Pyin U Lwin) where the family were staying for a brief break from the heat of Rangoon, Joan was concerned about her husband’s health as he was suffering from an unpleasant [and unnamed!) eye complaint and by the end of the month she was seriously considering whether they should retire from the Burma Service and ‘go home’ for the sake of A.J.’s health. He recovered but, by the end of the month, Joan was laid low with very painful boils in her ears and A.J. with a gastric complaint. At the beginning of July and back in Rangoon, Joan succumbed to dengue fever and was confined to her bedroom with the curtains drawn, aching from head to foot. Again, she recovered but is stricken with ‘fever’ once more in October (White, A.J. 1990 : 208-215).

Joan was 20 years old when she married and, although she came from a family which had many links with India, her resilience in coping with her life in her husband’s posting, trying to care for her first child and the family’s health is remarkable. From reading A.J.’s memoirs, it is also clear that her husband relied on her to maintain the family’s wellbeing, but Joan’s diary and letters reveal both her and her husband’s vulnerability to illness. One or the other of them seems to be ill with a frequency that would sap the resolve of many and yet, time and again, she recovers and carries on.

Enid Dawkins appears to have been singularly proactive in looking after her family’s health in Burma. Her diary reveals her effective organisation of a healthy diet,

either growing or buying fresh vegetable and meat, ensuring a plentiful supply of fresh eggs. In 1924, she gained a qualification in home nursing, which allowed her to deal more efficiently with medical problems both in her own family and those of the people of the communities for which her husband as a Forestry Officer, was responsible.

Nell Hughes describes a Christmas hunting camp near Mokshitwa (Burma) where she sets up a daily surgery for the local people. Among their patients was a little boy who had fallen from a tree and bitten through his lip causing a wound that, by the time he is brought to the clinic was so badly infected that Nell and her husband had to effectively 'operate' on him, cleaning out the infection and stitching the wound, happily with a successful outcome. She also successfully treated an old woman with toothache and another woman with chronic constipation and malaria. Before leaving she equipped a local woman who had shown an interest in First Aid with iodine, Lysol, Zambuk[62] and cotton wool (Hughes 1942: 23).

Another Christmas was spent visiting friends stationed deep in the forests of southwest Burma. It took the Hughes' 48 hours to reach the compound, but on arrival, they found a harmonious settlement where the Burmese Forestry workers' homes surrounded the main house of the Forestry Officer. A flourishing kitchen garden supplied the needs of the community and the Forestry Officer's wife ran a clinic for the estate workers and a simple school for all the children, including her own (ibid.: 30).

Margaret Leech, on her marriage, became, in her own words, 'a sort of welfare worker' to the 200 or so staff employed by her husband for Boustead and Company in Tumpat, Malaya. There was a permanently employed Indian dresser but, because he was a Hindu, none of the Malay Muslim men would let him treat their wives and daughters; instead, they asked Margaret to treat them. Margaret stated: 'did my best

[62] An antiseptic ointment.

for them. When my best wasn't good enough, I would ring my friends, either the doctor or the matron at the Kota Bahru hospital and they would tell me what to do' (Teasdale 1997: 95). She treated the most common complaints – mostly malaria and worms – from her own dispensary but had trouble persuading more serious cases to allow themselves to be taken to hospital as the local people believed that people only went to hospital to die.

Childbirth and children

For the greater portion of the period under examination, even in the metropole, the risk of a woman of the interwar years dying in childbirth was still as high as it had been at the beginning of Queen Victoria's reign in 1837 and ranged from 350 to 400 deaths for every 100,000 births (Loudon 2000: 241S). The greatest danger was from puerperal fever, an infection that attacked the mother's reproductive system during and immediately after birth and which was caused by the bacteria *Streptococcus pyogenes staphylococci.* Sepsis rapidly followed and until the introduction of sulphonamides, and then antibiotics in the later part of the period, there was little that could be done to save the mother. The risk of puerperal fever was increased by poor hygiene associated with home births, poorly or untrained midwives, and unnecessary invasive procedures during hospital deliveries(ibid).

Regardless of her position either temporally or socially, childbirth was not something that a woman could take lightly. For the colonial wives, there was the added burden of giving birth far from home without the comfort or company of a mother or sisters, and often without specialist medical assistance, should that be needed. Consequently, some wives were sent home to give birth if that could be afforded.

Joan White became pregnant for the first time while on the trip home immediately following her wedding and it was decided she should remain behind when A.J. returned to Burma at the end of his leave in mid October, and that she would have her baby in England and travel out the following February. On 22 November, A.J., received a cable telling him of the safe arrival of his first son. There were celebrations at the Secretariat in Rangoon and both mother's and baby's health were drunk in champagne. However, on 30 November a second cable arrived saying 'Joan seriously ill. No immediate danger. Everything possible being done.' By 4 December, Joan was on the road to recovery, but the emotional suffering of her new husband is reflected in this recollection of the event from his memoirs:

> I received this [cable] at the office and for a time felt quite stunned. I remember going to the window and looking across to the Legislative Council building in the quadrangle of the Secretariat and thinking that the sight of it would be engraved on my memory, which it was (White 1991: 194).

After a five week stay at a nursing home, by mid January, Joan was considered well enough to sail for Burma and she and Christopher arrived in Rangoon on 14 February (ibid.).

Joan and A.J. were devoted parents, a view born out in A.J.'s memoirs, Joan's letters and diaries and anecdotally, by their children. They clearly delighted in their first little boy, recording all his milestones. A.J. writes to his mother:

> Christopher seems to flourish more than ever. He is very happy these days – cries seldom and laughs very often, and never fails to greet either of us with a smile. You can imagine he is a perpetual joy to us (ibid.: 196).

Ruth Donnison, in contrast, had both her babies in Burma. By June 1925, she was pregnant for the first time. She remained well throughout her pregnancy and continued playing tennis and walking and enjoyed the cooler weather when the monsoons came. Her mother had sent a very expensive fine woollen layette[63]yet again striking the wrong note from London as it was sadly useless in Burma and Ruth settled to making baby clothes, copies of the traditional English garments, in lightweight cottons. Unlike many of her compatriots, Ruth had no intention of going 'home' or even to hospital to have her baby: after all, 'I was a healthy young woman' (D. Donnison 2005: 2005, 78). She was delivered at home by an Anglo-Indian midwife and a Swedish doctor whom she had never met before as the regular doctor for the area was unavailable. Ruth's labour was long, a forceps delivery was eventually performed, and the baby did not breath for nearly 20 minutes after delivery. Luckily for her, Ruth had been sedated and was not aware of the emergency. They named the boy David after Ruth's father, and despite her exhaustion and pain, she insisted on nursing the baby herself. However, the damage had been considerable, and she was advised not to have another baby for at least five years (ibid).

Her daughter, Annis, was born in 1930. In light of the difficult time she had during David's birth, it was considered better that the second confinement should take place in a hospital and so she travelled to Moulmein, where there was a Baptist Mission Hospital. It was six weeks before she returned and, according to his memoir, her five year old son, David, missed her very much. On her return, Ruth told him that this baby girl was '*his* baby as well as hers', and she explained all about the birth – inviting him to feel the soft place on the top of the baby's head where the two halves of the skull had yet to weld together' (D. Donnison 2005: 160).

[63] Layette – a set of clothing, bedding and sometimes toiletries for a newborn child.

Nell Hughes' first child was born in 1925. She spent the latter part of her pregnancy in the hill town of Maymyo, north of Mandalay, where she took up residence in a serviced flat in Craddock Court,[64] on Laisho Road. Her mother, by then in England, sent out the family nanny who had cared for Nell and her siblings and the baby, a boy, was delivered safely. Nell, the baby and the nanny went to Mandalay for a week to recover where Nell made offerings at the Arakan[65] Temple in gratitude for having been brought safely through the ordeal of childbearing. She later describes how much admired the baby was by local people when, aged six months, she and her husband took him with them when they toured the district. He would 'sit up in his pram and observe the world impartially and with deliberation, taking as his right the 'wah de' [fat] and 'hla de' [beautiful] of the admiring crowds' (Hughes 1942: 37).

Marian Firkins became pregnant soon after her arrival in Malaya but strongly resisted being sent 'home' for the birth, arguing that surely her husband would want to be close when his first – and, as it happened, only – child was born. She got her way and six weeks before her due date travelled from the rubber estate by ox cart, river boat, train, and ferry to Penang, so that she was able to give birth in hospital. The birth was easy and within two weeks she had taken baby Peter back to the estate. (Teasdale, J.: 1997 54)

Neither Ann Muriel Gammans nor Margaret Leech had children, but it is clear from the experiences of the women in my samples here who did give birth in Burma or Malaya at this time that childbirth was no less of an ordeal for them than it was for

[64] Craddock Court, Lasho Road, Maymyo, was built in 1918 and named for Sir Reginald Craddock, the Vice Governor from 1918–1922. It is still standing and is now the Orchid Hotel Nan Myanin and famous for being 'haunted'.

[65] Now known as the Mahamuni Temple.

women in the metropole, in that they were exposed to as many, if not more, practical and medical dangers.

Women such as these who bore and raised children in the tropical colonies, were also inevitably faced with the dilemma of whether to send their children home to school at around age seven when the official thinking was that the climate would start to sap their strength. However, an article in the *Straits Times* in March 1937, entitled 'Husband or Children? – Eternal Problem for Malayan wives – why Man should always win' *(Straits Times* 18 March 1937 supplement: P.1) presents the wife who does not send her children home to the UK as both foolish and selfish. Foolish in that, if she does not stay to 'look after' her husband another woman will soon take on the task for her, and selfish in that keeping her children with her because she cannot bear to be parted from them is denying them both health and education. 'Remember,' the author states, 'other women can always look after your children … once the baby stage has passed … one's duty is to one's husband.' The implication in this article is clearly that, although the position of the wife is ostensibly subordinate within the companionate marriage, it is she who must be prepared to make painful decisions to maintain the union. The underlying inference also implies that, without the 'services' of the wife being present, the colonial husband will not be able to maintain his marriage vows.

Out-of-home charitable and philanthropic activities

The next aspect of what may be considered to have been 'wife work' is the part played by British women in charitable and philanthropic work. Many of these engagements demonstrate the intersection of soft power – i.e., women contributing time and effort voluntarily for the welfare of the communities their husbands governed but who, by doing so, supported the foundations and structure that made that governance possible.

As stated by Strobel (1991: 50), this raises ‘fundamental questions about the moral validity of externally inducing social change and about the relationship of ‘humanitarian work’ to Imperialism’.

However, for the British women concerned, the lived experience was more nuanced, and again, positioned them at a fluid cross-section of the social strata. Humanitarian and charitable work provided an arena within which they, by using their patronage, not only wielded a certain amount of administrative power, but also because of the stratified colonial society within which they lived, meant that they were themselves subject and had to negotiate the bidding and directives of women who, because of their husband’s position, ranked higher than they did.

I will now examine the ways in which some of these women accommodated this cross-section with reference to Joan White’s work with the Girl Guide movement and Ruth Donnison’s connections with child welfare. I will also briefly examine Ann Muriel Gammans’ rejection of this facet of the role of the memsahib.

By the 1920s and 1930s, the ethos of the Boy Scout and Girl Guide movement as founded by Baden-Powell in the early years of the century had developed from a militaristic, predominantly imperial one to a far more international, racially inclusive organisation. The Girl Guides had emerged as a separate body from the Scouts, through the demands of young women who had organised themselves alongside their brothers to the point where they demanded and received recognition from Baden-Powell in 1910. Most importantly, although, in the interwar years, while Scouting and Guiding never lost their essentially paternalistic and colonial philosophy, the Baden-Powells distanced their youth movements from the rise of European fascism and encouraged their growth throughout the British Empire, linking them to the League of Nations, familial internationalism and peace (Alexander K.: 2017).

The Girl Guides had been established in India (and therefore, in Burma) during the First World War, but only started to accept indigenous members in the 1920s. However, by 1928 the All-India Girl Guides had become members of the World Association of Girl Guides and Girl Scouts. From its inception in India, it was the tradition that the Vicereine should take the position of Chief Guide for India while, in Burma, this role went to the wife of a prominent member of Rangoon society. After Burma became a colony (and not an appendage of British India) in 1937, the role went to the Governor's wife. Since 1918, the emphasis on Girl Guides as Imperial servants had changed to one of internationalism with girls being encouraged to view each other as equals regardless of race or class, within the hierarchical structure of the movement (ibid).

With its focus on teaching girls basic, practical life skills and fitness, the movement thrived in the settler colonies of Australia, South Africa, and Canada. However, it also grew rapidly in India and Burma and in both, provided a forum for European 'wives' who, in many cases had been part of the movement themselves as girls, to exercise influence both through leadership and administration, and within the community as an indirect way of underpinning the colonial society (ibid).

Joan White had been a Girl Guide in her teens and therefore it was not surprising that she should become involved with the movement again. As the wife of a senior member of the ICS (later Burma Civil Service, BCS) she was expected to engage with voluntary work. However, what is remarkable is that by the spring of 1934 she was overseeing six companies of Bluebells and Guides.[66] As has been noted earlier in this work, Joan had returned to the UK directly after her marriage because of

[66] In India the term Brownies for the younger members of the Guide movement was changed to Bluebells and subsequently Bulbuls.

her husband's health and had remained there to give birth to her first child in December 1933. She had been very seriously ill following the birth and had not been able to return to Burma with her baby until January 1934 but, by June and the monsoon season, she is 'active with her six companies of Bluebells and Guides' (White 1991: 196). What had motivated Joan to take on this burden so early in her married life in Burma and with a small baby to manage and a new household to run? Undoubtedly, partly because it was expected of her; she had, since her mother's remarriage to Captain Rust, grown up in an Indian Army family and knew the rules. However, it should not be forgotten that the woman who 'took Joan under her wing' and hosted her wedding in Rangoon was one Mrs Prior, who at that time had held the rank of Chief Guide. The Priors, as has been noted, were very senior in Rangoon society and a subtle request from Mrs Prior to help out with the Guides could not have been ignored by someone in Joan's position.

By 1937, Joan is described as effectively in charge of a large section of the Rangoon Girl Guide movement and her husband recalls that:

> During February there was a very large Girl Guide rally at Government House. Lady Cochran [the Governor's wife) was a very big noise in the Girl Guides at home and was very keen … Joan wrote that after pacing out the lawn with the ADCs she went upstairs to Lady Cochran's sitting room to discuss details. The rally went off well – there were 800 guides present (ibid.: 210).

By 1937, Burma had become a colony with its own Governor and A.J.S. White gained a senior position in the Secretariat, so once again, his wife was at the bidding of a senior memsahib and was taking on the burden of running a large event for which that memsahib took most of the credit. In her work with the Girl Guides, Joan White exemplifies the societal intersections she and women like her negotiated in the colonial

societies of which they were part. As a former Guide herself, she felt that the international ethos and the practical training and education supplied by the movement would be an asset to the indigenous girls who joined the movement. As far as the balance of power went in the social hierarchy of Rangoon society, she was certainly in a position of dominance and superiority to the young women and girls in her Guide companies. However, she herself was subject to the wielding of power by British women who were considered her own social superiors within that society. It is the underlying cross-sections of influence and power that Joan White and her contemporaries had to broker and surmount during their everyday lives as 'colonial wives' that I have explored in this section of the thesis.

Ruth Donnison, who did not share Joan's colonial background and who spent the first part of her time in Burma in up-country districts where her husband was a relatively young Deputy Commissioner, did not encounter the societal obligations to perform 'good works' as early. As has already been noted, however, she did unofficially undertake some of her husband's work when a deadline had to be met and as she generally accompanied her husband as he toured his district, she also did a certain amount of welfare work, giving basic First Aid and medical advice to assist the villagers where she could.

By 1938, Vernon Donnison was senior enough to warrant an appointment in the Secretariat in Rangoon and arguably Ruth would have come under the same 'soft' pressure from wives of his senior officers to undertake some perceived good works. However, it appears that the Donnisons were ahead of the game here as can be seen from Vernon's memoirs:

> But in Rangoon, where she had no ex-officio jobs, we knew that the senior ladies would press her to work for the Blind School or the Deaf School or take part in

> sewing parties for this or that or sell flags in in aid of some cause that was of little interest to her and of none to the Burmese. She wanted to do something more connected with reality and Burma. She was never very good at being bossed around by rather stupid women (D. Donnison 2005: 199).

Vernon used his influence in the judiciary, of which he was secretary, to have Ruth created a voluntary lay magistrate in the Rangoon juvenile courts. Here, with the support of a Burmese friend, Daw Tee Tee Luce, she involved herself with the plight of Rangoon street children and visited the refuges Daw Tee Tee had set up for them. Ruth became convinced that the juvenile courts could not gather enough information to make safe judgements on many of the cases before them and so took it upon herself to learn about the nascent British Probation Service in Britain and to persuade the authorities to provide the funding for two female and one male probation officer to assist the Rangoon Court. (D. Donnison: 2005)

Ann Muriel Gammans, living in Malaya in 1932, roughly the same time as Ruth and Joan were living in Burma, had a rather more contentious view of her charitable and humanitarian obligations as the wife of a colonial servant. She was briefly persuaded by Lady Clementi, the wife of Sir Cecil Clementi, the then Governor and Commander-in-Chief of the Straits Settlements, to become involved in the creation of an 'International Women's Club' in Singapore. However, she found the League ineffective and described it as 'a huge edifice which means very little'. She criticised the women who were involved for concentrating on tedious meetings, and producing lengthy and complex reports which were mostly to do with the maintenance of an abstruse and labyrinthine set of bylaws. Their only practical actions were to provide a soup kitchen at a welfare centre, a charitable task which she noted is carried out far

more efficiently and thoroughly by the Chinese charities, and to gather in sewing groups to make clothes for poor children. (Mss EurBrit. Emp. s 506/Box 2: Vol2)

If one views the 'out-of home and charitable' activities of the three women under examination through a sliding scale of involvement, then it is clear that Joan White was probably the most enmeshed in this area of 'wife-work', in that she became involved with the Girl Guide movement very soon after her arrival in Burma and remained so throughout her time there, managing to integrate this into her work as hostess and house keeper for her husband, nurse and medical advisor for her family and household, mother to a toddler and chief family letter writer (writing at least once a week to her mother-in-law and keeping up a correspondence with the rest of the family on her husband's behalf). Ruth Donnison also undertook unpaid social work once her husband gained seniority and was stationed at the Secretariat in Rangoon. However, her work as a lay magistrate and her attempts to start a rudimentary youth probation service was 'service' very much on her own terms. Ann Gammans clearly had little time for this side of the life of colonial wives and her refusal to become associated with Lady Clementi's 'International Women's Club' is indicative of her somewhat trenchant view of her own sex and its position and influence in the colonial society.

Colonial wives and their views of and relationships with women in both the local and the colonial societies

Orwell's description of Elizabeth Lackersteen, or Elizabeth Macgregor as she has become, in the closing pages of *Burmese Days*, quoted at the beginning of this chapter as a stereotypical view of the memsahib, avows that 'Her servants live in terror of her, though she speaks no Burmese' (Orwell 1936: 272). However, my research

demonstrates that the women whose lives I examined were to varying degree the antithesis of Orwell's pejorative description. All of them appear to have both respect and affection for the people who worked for them as servants and as carers for their children, and all realise the importance of learning the local language at least to a basic level. As far as their relationships with local women were concerned, both Maugham and Orwell would have us believe that the memsahibs either viewed them with at best condescension and scorn, and at worst, racist loathing or regarded them as two-dimensional figures who were essentially only part of the local scenery. Again, I have found the antithesis to be true and that many strong and lasting friendships were formed between women in the colonial and the indigenous societies their husbands ruled.

Of the women whose lives have been interrogated in this chapter, Ruth Donnison is arguably the one most involved with and interested in the Burmese women she encounters. Early in her married life, during her husband's posting to Kyonpyaw, she started a habit of accompanying him on walking tours of his district and the following description of a visit to a headman's house in one of the villages demonstrates her lack of condescension towards and genuine interest in the Burmese people among whom she lived:

> Sometimes, after a morning's tramp over fields, we would be invited to rest in a Headman's house. The family would gather round, taking a special interest in me because few European women had visited these parts. They would ask my age and how many children I had, then touch my clothes, purr with approval and ask how much this or that cost. I was usually wearing a khaki cotton shirt, breeches, a khaki topee and canvass boots – not nearly as charmingly dressed as our hostesses in their bright longyis [skirts] and dainty white muslin jackets (D. Donnison 2005: 97).

Local women were skilled in pottery and weaving and Ruth tried her hand at both. She evidently thoroughly enjoyed her time in the villages: 'I soon learnt how easy and natural Burmese people were to live with at close quarters.'[67]However, it was after the arrival of her first child that Ruth formed probably her most important friendship with a Burmese woman, when she invited Ma Than, the wife of their 'Head Boy' San Hla, to come and work as a nursery nurse. In Ruth's own words:

> Although she had none of her own, Ma Than had an instinct for babies. I taught her our ways of bathing and changing, and how to wash and thoroughly rinse clothes and napkins. In return she taught me so much – about her language and about Burmese customs and superstitions, which I encouraged her to follow, provided they did not conflict with my ideas of hygiene or comfort … Ma Than's cure for feeling unwell was to smoke a cheroot … Out of doors, resting by the pram or feeling tired on a hot day, she would light it and take a few puffs … the scent was delicious, Ma Than was refreshed and the smoke helped to keep flies and other insects away from the baby (ibid.).

From time to time, the baby suffered from heat rash and Ruth encouraged Ma Than to use *thanaka*[68] on him, which proved more effective than the Western ointments she could order from Rangoon. Ma Than became a trusted friend without whom Ruth always claimed she would never have learnt Burmese. 'I persuaded her to correct my pronunciation. By listening carefully and matching her lips when she spoke, I soon began to acquire a colloquial command of the language' (D. Donnison 2005: 122).

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[67] British Library, Mss Eur B357, Donnison, Ruth Seruya, unspecified, n.d.

[68] *Thanaka* is a paste made from powdered sandalwood and water used by the Burmese as a soothing ointment and a protection from the sun.

Soon after the birth of her first child, Ruth took him and Ma Than to Maymyo to escape the heat and dust of Yenangyaung while Vernon stayed behind, arranging their next move which was to be to Taunyggi in the Shan States in eastern Burma. On their first night in Maymyo, there was a violent storm that took out the rented apartment's electricity supply and part of the roof. Ruth and Ma Than rescued what they could from the puddles rapidly forming on the floor, wrapped the baby in a dry towel and 'then sat side by side to wait for the storm to pass. While she drew on her cheroot, we held hands to comfort one-another and all heaven roared outside' (ibid.).

During her time in Maymyo, Ruth and Ma Than grew close, spending their evenings together improving Ruth's Burmese and comparing notes on grooming. Ma Than was skilled at grooming her long hair with coconut oil and combs but not used to the concept of a hairbrush and was intrigued by Ruth's European belongings. In Ruth's words, ' a deep trust grew between us' (ibid.: 122).

Ruth and Vernon's next posting was to Taunggyi, the headquarters for the Shan States. Here, it was Vernon's task to deal with a possibly incendiary situation that occurred when the powerful and dictatorial Yaunghwe Sawbwa[69] died suddenly. The line of succession in Yaunghwe was far from clear and it was feared that violence and looting could break out if the situation was not carefully managed. Vernon managed to avoid this happening and, by liaising with the local noble families insured the peaceful appointment of a suitable successor.

The new Sawbwa was Saw Shwe Thaik, who was, in Vernon's opinion, the most suitable for the job but whose wife spoke no English and little Burmese, and knew nothing of the ways of the Europeans she would have to entertain. Ruth invited her to come and stay with the Donnisons, so that she could familiarise herself with the

[69] The Yaunghwe Sawbwa was the prince of the local Shan people.

different culture and for some weeks, the family ate Shan food for half the week and English food for the other half, and learned to play Shan chess in the evenings. The new Sawbwa and his wife had a little boy the same age as David Donnison and the two became bosom friends.

An examination of the lives of Ruth and Vernon Donnison, both during their time in Burma and more generally, makes it clear that here were two intellectually able and politically progressive people, and so it is to some extent hardly surprising that Ruth took more than a casual interest in the culture and lives of the women who surrounded her. However, my research revealed that she was not alone in these interests.

Nell Hughes, arriving in Burma in 1923, very soon recognised that she would not be able to run her household efficiently or speak with her neighbours until she learned Burmese and although she found it difficult, persevered until, at her own admission she could 'speak read and write Burmese reasonably well' (Mss Eur. C640). She later recounts an episode which happened during one of the tours her husband made of his forestry district. In a remote village, he was asked to shoot a rogue elephant that was ruining the village crops and at the successful conclusion of this expedition the villagers performed a *pwe*[70] entertainment in the Hughes' honour in which Nell records, with clear enjoyment, the little girls dancing 'like princes and princesses' and the clowns causing hilarity with broad humour (ibid).

This incident can be juxtaposed with two events recorded in George Orwell's writing. In his semi-autobiographical short story, *Shooting an Elephant* (1936), he details an incident not dissimilar to the Hughes's experience when as a young colonial police officer in Moulmein in Lower Burma, he was prevailed upon by the local

[70] A traditional form of entertainment in Burma involving dance, drama and clowning, almost always a community event.

populace to kill a tame elephant that had escaped from its owner and gone on the rampage, causing huge damage, and killing a local Indian 'coolie'. Orwell uses the story, in which he feels he was forced to kill the elephant, although by the time he finds it, it is posing little danger to anyone, to maintain 'face' in the presence of the indigenous colonised community. Once the deed has been accomplished, there are no celebrations, just a very angry Indian who has lost a valuable asset, and a crowd of Burmans with baskets, preparing to strip the creature's corpse for meat. Although Orwell has developed this incident into a polemic on the ills of colonialism, it makes an interesting contrast to Nell Hughes' story, where both she and her husband the Forestry Officer, representing the colonial power, do not appear to be subject to Orwell's introspection but rather at one with the local people in a pragmatic decision to rid them of a very real danger.

Shooting an Elephant is essentially used by Orwell as a metaphor demonstrating his belief that the despotic colonial rule depends on constant affirmative action. At a less polemic level the contrast between the pleasure Nell takes in the *pwe* performance and the distaste and disgust expressed by Elizabeth Lackersteen when put in a not dissimilar situation in *Burmese Days* is another example of reality being more acceptable than the fiction (Orwell 1936: 98). Nell's delight in the 'little 'princes and 'princesses' dancing in honour of her husband's action is in direct contrast with Elizabeth's reaction. She 'watched the dance with a mixture of amazement, boredom and something approaching horror … why had he [Flory] brought her here to watch this hideous and savage spectacle?' (Ibid). By opposing the real experience of Hughes to Orwell's fictional account the conclusion can be drawn that not all colonial wives behaved in the insular and racist fashion adopted by Orwell for his female British characters.

As has been noted earlier in this chapter, Enid Dawkins arrived in Burma in 1919 and spent the first 18 years of her married life there, leaving in 1937. During these years, Enid learned to speak, read, and write Burmese fluently and to be able to converse and understand the basics in several local languages. During her extended tour of her husband's district in the early months of 1927 and while camped on the banks of the Yaw River, Enid was visited by a group of local Thanglau ladies. She describes their fascination when shown the pictures in a English magazine, remarking that the costumes were very different from their own clothes. They did not approve of Enid's riding breeches and the fact she wore no bracelets or necklaces and were very keen for her and Colyear, her three year old who was travelling with her, to undress so that they could check they were correctly formed. Two Chin ladies also called whose faces were heavily tattooed and they smoked bamboo pipes and wore necklaces made up of strings of cornelians. Two things become clear from Enid's observations about these and other indigenous ladies who visited her during this trip; firstly, that she is as interested in them as they are in her ,and secondly, that they clearly felt free to voice their opinions to her (Mss Eur D913).

Meanwhile in Malaya, in 1932, Margaret Leech was keeping house for her brother who had been appointed as District Advisor to the court of Kelantan in the northeast of the peninsula. She recalled how on arrival her brother had advised her, if she wanted to see the country and understand the people, to 'learn the language! Learn Malay because no-one here will speak English' (Teasdale 1997: 94). Margaret became proficient quite quickly, helped by the local people she worked with in the fabric trade in Kelantan. [71] This skill became particularly useful to her when some of the local

[71] Margaret became 'middleman' ensuring the local weavers and crafts people received a fair price from local wholesalers. (Mss Eur D931).

women came to her with a girl they said was possessed by evil spirits. She talked to the girl who turned out to be only twelve years old and discovered she had been married off as soon as she passed puberty but that her husband was, in Margaret's words, 'a fairly buxom and powerful fishing chap and he just frightened her out of her wits' (ibid.: 95).

Margaret managed to convince the women that the girl should stay with her and see no men at all until she and her Head Boy's wife had cast out the devils. The girl regained her composure after some days in this all-female situation, but her husband became tired of waiting and married someone else, which meant her father lost the dowry he had paid. Margaret partly reimbursed him on the understanding that the girl be allowed to remain unmarried until she felt ready and then to have some say in her choice of husband. Subsequently, the girl found a suitable match, and all ended happily (ibid). This incident serves to illustrate that, far from being remote from and disdainful of the local people surrounding her, this colonial wife did involve herself with local affairs and particularly supported local women.

It should be made clear at this point that there was undoubtedly evidence of some British women behaving very much as Maugham and Orwell described them. However, the work that I have presented begs the question of how much the stereotypes portrayed in the work of these authors can be genuinely said to represent the women. My intention is to show that the behaviour and social standing of these women was far more nuanced and subject to ambiguity imposed by the patriarchal hierarchies of the circumscribed colonial societies than the authors suggest. To scrutinise this chauvinistic received picture of the typical memsahib, I have unpicked the views the colonial wives under examination in the chapter about each other.

Of all the women already introduced in the chapter, Ann Muriel Gammans was probably the most critical. She is an interesting woman who, from the diary extracts I have read, seems to be intensely practical and intellectually vigorous. She married at 19 and had no university education. However, in 1933 when the Gammans were stationed in Kuala Kangsar, she read 'Armstrong's book on Turkey and Syria,[72] an earlier one to his Mustafa Kemal – most interesting and shows how hopeless the present generation of Turks is' (Mss Eur Brit. Emp. s 506/Box 2).

Along with English translations of Irish Gaelic classics, she was also an enthusiastic reader of Olga Knopf's *The Art of Being a Woman* which was published in the United States in the early thirties. A review in the *New York Times* on 18 August 1931 describes Olga Knopf as a psychiatrist and a feminist, who believed that women's engrained inferiority complex balks them in business. Knopf traces this inferiority back to the nursery days and feels that the nascent American feminist movement is defeated by its failure to pre-suppose equality with men (*New York Times* 1931: 23). What Ann Muriel took from this book is that:

> … everyone decides their own fate, that you should take life as it is and don't make a dream world out of it. To keep the spirit unbroken, you need to take a keen interest in the living and refrain from blaming others for their personal shortcomings ((Mss Eur Brit. Emp. s 506/Box 2).

She takes this view into her everyday social life in Malaya, judging everyone she meets very much on their own merits and not via a preconceived set of class based social criteria. For instance, in her recollection of a visit to friends who ran a big rubber estate near Kuala Kangsar, Ann Muriel describes the husband as a 'blonde man who

[72] *Turkey and Syria reborn – a record of two years of travel* by Harold C Armstrong, published 1930.

talks a lot' but his wife 'seems much older but probably isn't'. She [wife] is, admittedly, a Cockney …"but has a heart of gold and is clever and capable. Their house shows evidence of people of taste and culture.' (Ibid) Equally she has great respect for the MacGregors, who managed a rubber plantation but lost their position during the 1929–1933 rubber slump in Malaya. Mr MacGregor returned to England to try to find another managerial position with one of the big rubber companies while his wife tried to keep the family income going in Malaya by opening a beauty salon in partnership with the Federal dispensary in Kuala Lumpur and Ann Muriel regards her as 'very plucky' (ibid).

These examples would seem to suggest a woman who has considered and formed her own independent views regarding the situation in which her marriage has placed her, as opposed to one who merely accepts without question the prejudices inherent in that situation.

Margaret Leech took a balanced view of the women who found themselves in Malaya because of their husbands' occupation:

> There were the ones that didn't like Malaya and didn't speak Malay and didn't want to belong and the others who learnt the language and tried to understand and help. European women in Malaya seemed to me to be divided into two groups. Those who were homesick and never wanted to be part of the country at all and were counting the days until they could go home. Often, they would spend their time playing bridge and dancing. Then there were those, who, like myself, were thrilled to be there and learnt the language and as much as possible tried to find out about the people and to make friends with them (Teasdale 1997: 96).

David Donnison (2005) remarks that his mother had problems forming friendships with other women; she had difficult relationships with her mother and sisters and even with her own daughter when Annis Donnison became an adult and,

in general, found men to be more congenial company. This attitude, due in her son's Mss Europinion, to a difficult childhood, may well have coloured her view of the European women she met in Burma. Certainly, when she and Vernon were stationed in Yenangyaung amid the Burmese oilfields she recounted visiting the American Club where she saw 'American wives so drunk they ended by pouring liquor down their chins instead of in their throats' (ibid 102) Of a fellow British ICS wife, she said: 'Mona Grant was an ambitious woman with a quick mind, who resented having to leave in England two school age children in return for a somewhat isolated life in Magwe. She made his [Derek Grant] life a misery – and embarrassed their guests – by constant complaints, or by ridiculing her husband at the bridge table, at tennis and even over his driving of a car.'However, she also observed that most British men in Burma treated women as playthings – certainly as people incapable of understanding anything serious' (ibid.: 107).

Conclusion

My purpose in this chapter was to demonstrate, by closely examining the lived experience of a selection of British women who went to the colonies of Malaya and Burma during the interwar years, their active involvement both in the stratified colonial societies and their engagement with the indigenous people with whom they came into contact. In this way, I wish to dispel the stereotype engendered in the fiction of Maugham and Orwell, of the two dimensional, shallow, immoral British memsahib which in many ways has survived to the present day.

Original sources for the research supporting the chapter were scarce and difficult to find being frequently contained in the archive of the husband with no independent identity of their own. This would seem to underpin the contentions of

Strobel (1991) and Gartrell (1984) that the colonial wife was viewed as part of the 'total person' of the male colonial servant. However, closer examination specifically of these women through their own records, confirms them as being active agents, in many subtle ways independent of their husbands within the colonial society.

The role of the wife within both the metropole and the colonial society in the interwar years has been examined and found to be a complex mix in that, although women were gaining independence via political emancipation and the increasing role they were playing in the workplace, the state of marriage as a social and moral stabiliser was still deemed socially imperative. Within the conjugal state, although 'companionate' rather than 'economical' marriages were now the norm in both the British metropolitan and the colonial societies, it was still viewed as an alliance within which the husband was the dominant and more important member.

The role of the wife in the colonial society was to be supportive, whether by maintaining her own and his health, raising his family and running their household and their social life efficiently and economically – all of this in order that he may be in peak condition to play his part and rise within the colonial hierarchy of which they were a part. That this was indeed the accepted view of marriage in the colonial societies can be seen in excerpts from various contemporary local English newspapers, which, with varying degrees of chauvinism, demonstrate the embedded notion of the subordinate position of the wife.

The various women whose lives I investigate in this chapter demonstrate a wide variety of social backgrounds, ranging from Marian Firkins, who had been born into what was essentially rural poverty in Worcestershire in 1892 to Nell Hughes and Enid Dawkins, born respectively in Varanasi and Mussorie, both undoubted 'daughters of the Raj'. Educational differences were also considerable; Ruth Donnison and Margaret

Leech were educated to degree level, while Ann Muriel Gammans was privately educated and married at 19 and Marian Firkins left school at 12.

I examined the ways in which these women variously adapted to their married lives in the colonies through the lenses of the formal and ceremonial aspects, domestic and home management, family health and child rearing, out-of-home charitable and philanthropic activities, and the women's views of and relationships with other women both in the local and the colonial societies they inhabited. The result of this examination shows that these women, far from living the passive and parasitic lives that typify the women of Maugham and Orwell's fiction, readily embraced the changes and ambiguities. The adjustments prescribed within the lives their marriages brought them, demonstrated active agency in negotiating the intermingled and frequently juxtaposed strands within the social dynamics of the colonial society and they flourished, learned from and enjoyed their time in the colonies in question.

Chapter 7 – Conclusion

My aim in writing this thesis has been to challenge the negative stereotype of the British women who made their lives in Burma and Malaya in the interwar years. To this end I examined the creation of this image through the fictional personae in the works of Somerset Maugham and George Orwell, in order to show how this antipathetic oversimplification reflected the chauvinistic and patriarchal attitudes both of the male authors in question and of contemporary attitudes of what was still a society under masculine dominance.

To refute this stereotype, and finding that this group appeared to be under represented in colonial history, I undertook detailed research into the lived realities of a range of British women who spent the interwar years in the colonies in question. In conjunction with using this material to make evident the fallacies in the fictional representation, my intention has been to give a voice to women who were neglected and effectively 'silenced' by both the male-dominated late colonial world in which they lived and by modern writers and academics.

My research showed that hierarchically based gender inequalities that were evident in the imperial regimes and which provide us with a metaphor for the asymmetric power relationship between the colonisers and the colonised, were also present in the interior structure of the colonial society itself, to the detriment of its women. In the interwar years, while this masculine dominance still informed the overriding social paradigm in the metropole, as far as the colonial situation was concerned, any internal challenge was perceived by the superior male authorities as a threat to their ascendancy and this led to the 'blame' culture that became attached to the women as the imperial system began to crumble. However, the fluidity and

sensitivity with which the women whose lives I interrogated negotiated these gendered hierarchies of authority, would suggest that the more virulent racism and the maintenance of imperial dominance were due to the increasingly inflexible and draconian structures put in place by men who were overtly convinced of their innate superiority and right to rule.

When considering the concept of 'Otherness' and its application to the colonial societies I have investigated, I have concentrated not on the perceived 'Otherness' through which the imperialists viewed the people they ruled but rather the extent to which the concept existed within the gender-imbued hierarchies of the colonial society itself. I conclude that from the outset, the women who came to these colonies were conceptualised as 'Other' by the dominant male authorities; the 'Us'. This is evident in the contemporary social construct of the British woman, which, even after the apparent shift in gender boundaries at the close of the First World War, was predominantly one of subordination to the male. The gender divisions were overtly binary; men to rule, provide and protect, and women to obey, domesticate and defer to masculine protection. In the early days, before British women came to the colonies in any numbers, social mores were less severe, but the presence of the women brought this laissez-faire situation into sharp focus. That they were perceived as the 'Other' by the dominant male, albeit an 'other' that was put on a pedestal, meant the women's position could be ambiguous, especially in the case of the women who did not follow the traditional domestic route but who worked for instance in the medical profession as nurses and doctors. These last were areas where the male-dominated hierarchy felt threatened, thus increasing the sense of the women as 'Other'.

The male perception of the position of the female in the colonial society had partly been created through the increasing importance of the imperial mission to bring

civilisation to the empire. However, this created a paradox as the arrival of the women also meant that the 'civilising standards' had to be applied to their own society in order for it to stand as an example, thus proscribing the more laissez-faire attitudes that previously pertained. Thus, the view of the colonial males towards the colonial women was dichotomus in that the women were weak and subjugated and therefore deserving of their respect and protection, while conversely and by their very presence, instilling a more racially stratified ethos male sexual activity was concerened which was viewed with a certain amount of resentment.

The manifest racism which was a primary tenet of the colonial system in general cannot be denied and has been rightly and roundly criticised and condemned in modern times. I fully acknowledge that the women represented in my study were part of the overtly racially segregated community designed to ensure the dominance of the colonisers. However, a close examination of their lives revealed that their experience of this discrimination differs, and is more diverse and ambiguous than that of their male compatriots. The maintenance of the racially divided society within which the colonial/white race, represented by male authority figures, were not only dominant but needed to be seen to be so, is an acknowledged and basic tenet of colonial rule. The colonial women, however, because of their subordinate role within the white colonial society, were able to negotiate the racial divide in a less authoritarian manner, especially in their relations with colonised women.

Relationships forged in the unofficial spheres of domestic life and childcare, to an extent, subverted the official racial divide, and were sometimes prompted by the purely pragmatic aim of creating the best possible conditions to ensure a smoothly run and harmonious household but also, in many cases, due to a genuine interest in the lives and cultures of the women in whose country they lived.

In the case of the women working in the medical profession, their endeavours to create relationships and share their knowledge with local women seems to have been motivated by a deep seated and practical desire to save lives. Their view of themselves was as medical professionals, not, as has been claimed, as being a part of the repressive and racist colonial regime.

As to whether these women were passive victims of the colonial system, my research suggests that this is how they were portrayed in contemporaneous male authored fiction where this supposed 'victimhood' is extended to make them not only pawns in the system but also malicious and puerile and frequently viewed with patronising disdain by the superior male characters. To a lesser degree, their general presence was certainly resented by some members of the opposite sex within the colonial community who regarded them as unfit both mentally and physically, to be there. Within the medical community their male colleagues viewed them subliminally as a threat while the male-dominated civil society saw them as narrow minded and proscriptive. However, I argue that these perceptions were created by the overarching colonial mission to 'civilise' the people over whom the colonists held sway. If the 'British way of life' was the ideal then it was necessary for the colonial society to be composed of both men and women to manifest it on the ground. That the social and racial hierarchies within the society became more extreme in the interwar years was not a function of the advent of the women but rather the public expression of what was becoming an increasingly stringent colonial rule, imposed by the administration as a bulwark against the beginning of the disintegration of their authority. However, there needed to be a scapegoat to blame for the disintegration and the women were given the blame. To this extent, they could be called victims, but in that, as my research shows, they manoeuvred their paths through these colonial social edifices with

considerable skill and perceptiveness. I feel that nomenclature fails to do justice to a thought provoking group of women.

Ultimately, it has been paradoxical argument of ‘Racist but moral women, innocent but immoral men’ (Stoler 1989: 639), that has proved for me to be the most illuminating lens through which to view my research on the lived experiences of the women whose lives I interrogated. These women, like Stoler’s examples in the Dutch East Indies and French Indochina, were living through a period of Imperial history where a predominantly male authoritarian élite was to a great extent too arrogant to examine the problems with which they were increasingly being presented with any degree of objectivity. In the case of the British colonialists (an area on which Stoler only touches), convinced of their superiority and realising the necessity to tighten their ranks and clarify their boundaries, the men justified the increasingly segregationist standards as ‘what the women “deserved”, and more importantly what white male prestige required that they maintain’ (ibid.) However, the day-to-day maintenance of these increasingly strictly marking out of their social and racial boundaries, was a task which they expected to be unreservedly espoused and accomplished by the women. When this plan appeared to be faulty and the cracks in their authority not only continued but started to widen, their self absorption allowed them to place the blame on the women. As Stoler (ibid.) reminds us, the women were both ‘chided for not respecting local conventional racial distancing and of being more or less racial in their own right.’

So were the women I have examined ‘moral but racist’? In my opinion they were ‘moral’ not in the pejorative sense of ‘narrow minded’ which is Stoler’s connotation but in the sense that they lived lives which were not without problems different from but no less taxing in their own way than those of contemporary women in the metropole,

while endeavouring to preserve and nurture the lives of those around them, from their own immediate families to the local people their husbands ruled. This thesis demonstrates that a scion of British colonial society that has previously been neglected, as has women's place in the social and political history of the twentieth century, is of academic interest for its own sake. I wish to be clear in stating that my work is in no way a justification for colonialism but an objective investigation into one group of women within the colonial sphere.

Although this thesis repositions these women in a more positive light than has been allowed for in previous stereotyping, my research to support this was, of necessity, based on fewer primary sources than I had hoped to find. This was a result of the Covid-19 pandemic which prevented me from undertaking at least two important research trips overseas and others within the UK when local travel restrictions were in place. Now that borders have opened, there is certainly more scope for me to develop this work further. I hope that future research exploring these aspects of colonial society will develop, employing and developing objective angles and viewpoints through which to examine groups of women like these, who have so far been neglected but who, like all women, deserve a voice.

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Appendix

Critique of 'A nutritional disease of childhood associated with a maize diet' by Cicely Williams (1933)

An analysis of this article which seeded the kwashiorkor vs pellagra debate allows the reader an insight into not only Cicely Williams' determination to isolate and identify a condition which her colleagues were refusing to recognise but also to demonstrate how differently centred was her approach to colonial medicine and healthcare to that of her colleagues.

From the start of the paper, Williams places great importance in a holistic approach to diagnosis. Under the heading of 'Family customs', she (Williams 1933: 423) states: 'In order to appreciate the salient points in the patients' history it is necessary to understand some of the local customs of the Gold Coast Colony.' The subsequent ethnographic summary of the situations from which children with the condition she is researching emerge and her insistence on the collection of family histories of patients wherever possible, even if knowledge of three local languages was necessary in order to do this, emphasise her increasing interest in preventative as well as curative healthcare. Also highlighted here is her belief in the benefits of breastfeeding; a theme that was to colour her healthcare practice throughout her career.

Williams' meticulous descriptions of the condition under research together with her detailed case studies and photographs which include vital both pre- and post-mortem details and illustrations, accentuate her rigorous approach and it is in this section of the paper that she clarifies what her findings indicate are the essential differences between the condition that was to become known as kwashiorkor and pellagra. While she makes no direct statements, it is clear from the tone of her writing

that she feels her colleagues are failing in their duty to their patients by ignoring these differences. For instance, regarding pellagra, the most common misdiagnosis, she notes: ‘Pellagra is generally described in adults, and the character and distribution of the skin lesions are not like those described above. … There is no dryness of the skin, no branny desquamation as is described in pellagra.’ (ibid.: 431).

Her subsequent detailed description of the small but essential differences in both background and symptoms of patients implied that a diagnosis of pellagra sometimes points to a lack of thorough examination on the part of the physician. In her case notes, Williams mentions several times that the Wasserman test was given and returned negative. The Wassermann test was one of the pioneering ways of diagnosing in these cases inherited syphilis and was routinely used in the Colonial Medical Service merely on the assumption that this condition was likely. Both here and in her later work in Singapore and Malaya, Williams questions the usefulness of this test. In the Gold Coast, in the case of children, it invariably came back negative and seemed to say more about the assumptions of the physicians giving it than it did the people it was supposed to help.

The conditions under which she was working did not allow Williams to conduct a proper scientific investigation into the cause of the condition, but she was convinced that it was dietetic and closely linked with children on the first few months of life being moved from the fat/protein rich breast milk to a wheat/corn-based diet with little or no fat or protein. She saw children with this condition who were treated in hospital with cod liver oil and a good brand of condensed milk in hospital and then kept to a diet which included these plus eggs, marmite, fruit and malt both recover and thrive (ibid.: 482). However, the increase of vitamins, which was the standard treatment for pellagra

was ineffective. She was later proved to be right, when kwashiorkor was proved to be due to a lack of protein while pellagra was due to a lack of Vitamin B.

Williams' holistic approach to medicine is made particularly clear in the final section pf the paper where she recommends preventative measure that can be taken to stem the likelihood of children dying from this condition. Firstly, she calls on the colonial authorities to encourage the use of milk in the diet of local people. She advises three ways in which this can be achieved: import duties on high quality tinned milk should be cut so that merchants had an incentive both to import and to sell it at reasonable prices. Secondly, Colonial Agricultural Officers should introduce and interbreed milking goats with the native goats and educate people in obtaining milk and milk products from them. Finally, the colony's education policies should put an emphasis on the teaching of good habits of hygiene and diet in the schools.