

Illustrations of the East: Representations of Malaya in Selected British Colonialist Writings

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This paper examines the representations of “native” scenes in Malaya in selected nineteenth-century and early twentieth-century British writings and publications, and argues that such illustrations were crucial to the consolidation of the English civilizing mission and the strengthening of British colonial rule in the region. My discussion juxtaposes the more familiar views of the female travel writer Isabella Bird in *The Golden Chersonese and the Way Thither* (1883) with two lesser known non-literary sources, specifically a report of the Duke of Edinburgh’s visit to Penang in a February 1870 edition of *The Illustrated London News* and an extract on the employment of local servants from *The Colonizer: Travellers Handbook for British Malaya* (1937). In doing so, I argue that these selected “illustrations of the East” not only reflect the British perception of the Malays, Chinese and Indians as the three main races in Malaya during the colonial era but more importantly emphasize the notion of the benevolence of British imperialism and its transformative benefit to the local peoples, both of which were meant to unify and reinforce British political power in the region. If Bird’s depiction in *The Golden Chersonese* reinforces a sympathetic view of the British colonial administration and “refashions” [Malaya] as “a quasi-domestic space of the imperial nation” (Tay 2011: 43), then the journalistic piece on the Duke of Edinburgh’s visit to Penang as well as the extract from *The Travellers Handbook for British Malaya* expand the notion of colonialism as a benevolent endeavour even further. In short, these texts, “marginal” as they are, provide a valuable cultural contribution to the contemporary understanding of racial discourse and its influence on the ideological construct of “British Malaya” for the reading public, whether in Victorian times or our own, especially when read as complementary voices to more widely known colonial authors like Hugh Clifford, Frank Swettenham, Joseph Conrad and Somerset Maugham.

Isabella Bird’s exploits as a bold and free-spirited Victorian female traveller, an undeniable and rare achievement that spanned five decades of traversing the globe, are by now familiar in the scholarship of the era, and have been discussed by biographers and critics like Anna Stoddard, Pat Barr, Rebecca Steffoff, Shirley Foster, Marion Tinling and John Gullick. *The Golden Chersonese*, which revolves around her 5-week trip to the Malay States (specifically Malacca, Negri Sembilan, Selangor, Penang, and Perak), and narrated through letters to her sister Henrietta from 19 January to 25 February 1879, reproduces for her readers not just the immediacy of her travel experiences, but also

serves to reinforce the benevolence and kindness of British colonial rule in Malaya, a view that is “in keeping with the civilizing mission of imperialism, whereby other cultures are brought into the ambit of civilization and transformed—not by force but by compassion” (Tay 35). Indeed, Tay notes how for Bird, “the history of Malaya cannot but begin with European colonialism”. In describing the Malay Peninsula in her introductory chapter as “somewhat of a terra incognita” with “no legitimate claim to an ancient history” (Bird 19), Bird implies that Malaya has no claim to history *until* the arrival of European colonialism, and begins its journey into modernity and civilization especially with the advent and rise of British colonialism. Thus, to the nineteenth-century British reader whom she addresses in *The Golden Chersonese*, “Malaya has always been thought of as British Malaya and never was otherwise” (Tay 21).

In highlighting the connection between travel writing and colonialist discourse, Mary Louise Pratt argues that colonialism was generally regarded as a “masculine” project, the genre itself characterized by “the rhetoric of discovery” and “a goal-oriented rhetoric of conquest and achievement,” transmitted through and dominated by the voice of the male narrator (148). In contrast, women travel writers, as Sara Mills notes, were perceived as “marginal” figures in the colonial discursive framework, their presence in the exotic places they visited often considered “eccentric, abnormal, even slightly ridiculous” and the accuracy of their accounts “cast in doubt as exaggerated women’s tales” (O’Callaghan 94). Mills explains the double standards with regards to the gendered perception of nineteenth-century travel writing as follows:

In the colonial context, British women were only allowed to figure as symbols of home and purity; women as active participants can barely be conceived of. This is because of social conventions for conceptualizing imperialism, which seem to be as much about constructing a *masculine* British identity as constructing a national identity *per se*... [so that] women’s writing and involvement in colonialism was markedly different from men’s...[thus] women travel writers were unable to adopt the imperialist voice with the ease which male writers did. The writing which they produced tended to be more tentative than male writing, less able to assert ‘truths’ of British rule without qualification. (3)

In choosing to write about Malaya and its peoples, Bird was well aware of her marginalised position as an author of “colonial” subjects, one that not only exposed her to a greater level of criticism compared to her male counterparts, but also threatened her personal reputation as a woman and thus a “symbol of home and purity”. Bird’s depiction of Malaya in the passages I discuss, however, emphasizes how her “feminine” status as “a lady” remains uncompromised in her writings, either through self-effacement and modesty, or reinforcing domestic or social relationships. Bird’s sensitive and individualized portraits of the Resident of Perak Sir Hugh Low and his Assistant

Resident Sir William Maxwell, for instance, demonstrate her endorsement of their compassionate nature as colonial officers, adopting the conventions of female propriety that emphasized a benevolent paternalism in order to assert the “truths” and validity of British colonial rule. As Susan Morgan observes, in Bird’s text, “colonial administrators are judged...according to a British domestic ideology which values sympathy and tenderness over a more aggressive representation of manliness” (153). Thus, while her views of the native races are often marked by moments of ambivalence that highlight her shifting attitudes towards the colonial endeavour, her acceptance of British moral superiority as embodied by the values displayed by these two men as “model” administrators is much more self-assured and rarely questioned.

Consider Bird’s portrayal of the Malays in the following passage, where she describes them as “civilised peoples”, stating that:

...the Malays would be much offended if they were called savages, for they are not so. They have an elaborate civilisation, etiquette, and laws of their own, are the most rigid of monotheists, are decently clothed, build secluded and tolerably comfortable houses, and lead domestic lives after their fashion. (161)

Her apparent admiration for the Malays as a people is however undercut by her observation that their “elaborate” civilization is, unfortunately, questionable, for “they have no knowledge of geography, architecture, painting, sculpture, or even mechanics” (35) while “[e]ducation among them is at a very low ebb” (35). Furthermore, in agreeing with Sir Stamford Raffles that the Malay Peninsula suffers from “the want of a well-defined and generally acknowledged system of law”, Bird suggests that there is a clear need for a continued British colonial administration, given that the Malays themselves “have taken refuge and sought protection for the industry under our laws!” (36).

Likewise, in depicting the Chinese, she credits their strength, industry and thriftiness, stating that “they can bear with impunity the fiercest tropical heat, and can thrive and save where Englishmen would starve”. Nevertheless, during her trip to Malacca, she decries how “along with their industrious habits and their character for fair trading”, they have brought negative habits like gambling and opium-smoking (130). This negative stereotype is further reinforced during her visit to Sungai Ujong, where, accompanied by Mr. Hayward, the British Superintendent of Police, she describes the Chinese gamblers she sees as “poor, half-naked creatures...staking every cent they earn on the turn of the dice”, making them “a truly sad spectacle”, while the “opium inebriates” are “lean like skeletons, and very vacant in expression” (Letter XIII January 1879, 179-80). In both instances, Bird extols the virtues of British rule in Malaya, for how could its peoples, in displaying such backwardness and unpredictability, be expected to know how best to govern themselves?

Indeed, what is most striking in Bird's depiction of the Malays, Chinese and Indians as the three main races of colonial Malaya is her unequivocal emphasis on their general acceptance of British rule, one that she portrays as originating from the administrators' understanding of and respect for local culture, and motivated by a firmly progressive spirit of order and reform. She assures her readers, for instance, that the Chinese population in Malacca is a "valuable one," for their upper classes are "singularly public-spirited" and "law-abiding" but most importantly, because they are "strongly attached to British rule" (131). The administration of Captain E.W. Shaw, the Lieutenant-Governor of Malacca, is described as being "of the gentlest and most paternal description, so that from the Chinese he has won the name of 'Father,' and among the Malays, the native population, English rule, as administered by him, has come to be known as 'the rule of the just'" (125).

Bird also draws attention to the acknowledgement of the efficacy of British colonial rule among the Chinese during her visit to the Residency in the State of Sungai Ujong by declaring how Chinese economic prosperity here is dependent on the British maintenance of law and order. In light of the pervasive in-fighting among rival Chinese clans, she stresses how the "Capitans China", as leaders of the Chinese community in Sungai Ujong, "work cordially with the Resident in all that concerns the good of the State...in return for the security which property enjoys under our flag". In short, like the Chinese in Malacca, those in the State of Sungai Ujong display "their perpetual and renewed satisfaction with British rule" (180-81) due to the social and economic benefits derived from it.

Such an attitude is not restricted only to the Chinese, for Bird implies that all right-minded citizens of Malaya, whether natives or immigrants, can attest to the transformative and civilizing power of British governance and its attendant benefits. Following her journey to Sungai Ujong and Selangor, Bird proceeds to visit Pinang (Penang) and emphasizes what she perceives as the recognition of British moral superiority among the multicultural crowd of "Asiatics" in Georgetown, and hence, their implicit acceptance of the compassionate and efficient nature of British rule. "Chinese, Burmese, Javanese, Arabs, Malays, Sikhs, Madrasses, Klings, Chuliahs, and Parsees [...] all get a living, depend slavishly on no one, never lapse into pauperism, retain their own dress, customs, and religion, and are orderly." And lest she is accused of cultural and political bias, she cites her Kling¹ boatman, who opines that Pinang is economically successful because "Empress good — coolie get money; keep it". In what can only be an unabashed endorsement of the rule of Victoria, the passage culminates in her assertion that "all these people enjoy absolute security of life and property under our flag, that they are certain of even-handed justice in our colonial court." Thus England is "'a name to conjure with,' and is represented by prosperous colonies, powerful protective forces, law, liberty, and security" (237).

Bird's high regard for administrators like the Resident of Perak Sir Hugh Low and his Assistant, Sir William E. Maxwell, whom she viewed as the embodiment of benevolent colonialism, is thus unsurprising; much of her five-week trip to the Peninsular was after all, hosted by prominent colonial administrators like them. Journeying onward from her trip to Penang, Bird's chapters on Perak are filled with glowing passages in which she draws attention to both these men's knowledge, skills and accomplishments as administrators. Of Low she states that he is "greatly esteemed" and "regarded in the official circles of the Settlements as a model administrator." Some of his most notable virtues are his "thoroughly idiomatic knowledge of the Malay language," his "sympathetic insight into Malay character", as well as his genuine liking and respect for the Malays as a people. Indeed, this lack of racial prejudice is what allows Low to bridge what is often "an impassable gulf between the British official and the Asiatics under his sway" (300). As a study in contrasts, Low had clearly learnt the lessons of managing the Malays as a people from the murder of his predecessor JWW Birch, the first Resident of Perak, who "unfortunately...did not speak Malay or understand the customs and prejudices of the people," and gained notoriety for his ill-treatment of the Malays, factors that Frank Swettenham claims ultimately led to his slaying (197).

Bird accords Maxwell, an accomplished Malay scholar and the renowned author of *A Manual of the Malay Language* (1881), a similar respect, noting that he "takes the trouble to understand [the Malays] and enter into their ideas and feelings" and how his work is "useful, conscientious and admirable." Such sincerity and effort is rewarded through the establishment of his reputation not only among the British but also the Malays in general, as "the right man in the right place," for as the author declares, "few people understand the Malays better than he does" (264). For Bird, what distinguishes Low and Maxwell from other colonial officers, especially in handling the delicate political situation in Perak after the murder of JWW Birch in November 1875, is not only their familiarity with the Malay language and their understanding of local customs and cultures, but more significantly, their practice of "tact, firmness, patience, and a uniformly just regard for both Malay and Chinese interests" (252).

Although conscious that readers might accuse her of "forming hasty and inaccurate judgments, and of drawing general conclusions from partial premises", especially given the added risk of "seeing things through official spectacles" due to her close interaction with these two administrators, she remains unapologetic in her admiration of these men, and for Low in particular. To Bird, Low's modest, respectful and accessible style of colonial administration is not just a model for other Residents, but is also successful precisely because "he devotes his time and energies to the promotion of prosperity, good order, and progress, in a firm and friendly spirit." In contrast to the bullying tactics employed by the Resident of Selangor, Mr. Bloomfield Douglas, whom Bird describes

to her publisher John Murray as “the most fiendish human being that I have ever seen” and whose “mis-government of the State was gross and brutal” resulting in “a rule of fraud, hypocrisy and violence” (Barr 140), Low’s administration of Perak is based on “the principles and practice of good government” so that the native Rajahs shall in future “be able to rule firmly and justly”. His “wise and patient efforts” are thus to be admired and emulated (319).

If Bird’s representation of British Malaya in *The Golden Chersonese* reflects a sympathetic view of the British colonial administration, then the journalistic piece on HRH the Duke of Edinburgh Prince Alfred’s visit to Penang in the February 1870 edition of the *Illustrated London News* expands the notion of colonialism as a benevolent endeavour even further. Such a perspective is influenced not only by the subject matter of the said piece, focussed as it is on the royal visit to Malaya, but also the demographic target of the *Illustrated London News* itself, one that illustrates a “Western-centred coverage of local affairs” (Tate 2). Publicized as “The World’s First Illustrated Newspaper”, the *Illustrated London News* (ILN) was founded by the newsagent and printer Herbert Ingram, who published its first issue on 18th May 1842, and declared its aim as “to keep continually before the eye of the world a living and moving panorama of all its activities and influences”.² The historian Arthur Bryant in the centenary issue of the *ILN* emphasized its remarkable status as the leading illustrated newspaper of the nineteenth century, and declared it as “probably the most important and comprehensive single historical document ever compiled” on the Victorian period. Up to its final issue in 2003, the newspaper served to provide fascinating insights into British public life and social history, and was unrivalled in its coverage of the “moving panorama” ranging from “world events, politics, the pleasures of the people; their theatres, their concerts, their galas, their races and their fairs’, ‘the pleasures of the aristocracy; their court festivals, their bals masques, their levees’.³ Yet as Tate asserts, while Western travellers (including officials and government envoys, sea captains and adventurers, merchants and Christian missionaries) were familiar with Malaya, the Straits Settlements “appeared as only tiny dots on the world map.” Its happenings were “very much taken for granted” and “required a royal visit or some significant global event such as the outbreak of war with China to bring them into focus” (2).

Thus, it is unsurprising that, much like Bird’s depiction of Penang as a beacon of economic success that draws immigrants from all over the world, the anonymous correspondent of the *ILN* article portrays the visit of the Duke to Penang as an occasion for celebration because it serves to unite all the different races together in their embrace of the superiority and stability afforded by British rule. The author writes:

When the news reached us that the Galatea and her Royal Captain would touch at our port on the way to Calcutta, *loyalty was the prevailing feeling amongst us. All the different*

nationalities contended in emulation to express their devotion to the Queen by their welcome to her son and representative. The town burst out in decoration. Triumphal arches, from the gorgeous silk-draped structure of the Chinese to the humble but pretty erection of the Kling, arose in every direction. Betel-nut trees...seemed to grow as if by magic. [...] Here was a Chinese arch that spanned the street, bearing the inscription, "Welcome to our future Admiral!" next to that an English decorator had emblazoned "God save the son of our Queen!" while the Hindoo dwellings would have "God bless the Queen!" and "Welcome our Sailor Prince!"[...] The jetty and fort were immediately thronged with people of every nationality from Britain to Japan, and of every complexion, from the fair-haired Saxon to the black-skinned child of the burning sun, but all full of excitement and glad anticipation. (1870: 135, emphasis added)

Although the article declares itself as a "news report", the fact that it is loaded with affective qualities, or employs what Morgan terms the "rhetoric of emotion" suggests that it serves as little more than colonialist propaganda, much like Bird's depiction of the "wonderful" multicultural crowd she witnesses in Georgetown, Pinang discussed earlier (Bird 237). Even given the limitations of the illustrated newspaper as a genre compared to Bird's more expansive travelogue, as an example of journalistic writing, the report lacks depth and substance, focussing as it does on a superficial display of unity and harmony between the British and their Malayan subjects as means to justify the benevolent rule of the former. Still, Bird was perceptive enough to realize that, despite her firm belief in the indispensability of British rule, such displays of loyalty and affection from the "natives" would never truly bridge the impassable gulf between the English and their colonial subjects. As she states, "The Malays highly appreciate the manner in which law is administered under English rule...[but] [t]his is by no means to write that the Malays love us, for I doubt whether the *entente cordiale* between any of the dark-skinned Oriental races and ourselves is more than skin deep" (Bird 136). In contrast, the correspondent of the article reveals no such insights, preferring instead to highlight how the royal visit becomes an occasion to demonstrate the support and loyalty of the native peoples of Malaya for British rule, one that also reinforced among its readership the popular notion of the Straits Settlements as "tiny dots on the world map" temporarily brought to life and public attention by the animated pageantry on display but which would soon return to its languid pace once the visit was over.

If the "picturesque" celebration scene in *The Illustrated London News* offers a pleasant though belaboured view of British colonial life, then the travel advice and tips found in *Travellers Handbook for British Malaya* (1937) are sobering reminders that racial stereotypes of the native races persisted into the twentieth century and beyond, despite earlier attempts such as Bird's to provide a more "objective" view of the Malayan peoples, albeit with the aim of validating the "wise and righteous" rule of colonial administrators like Hugh Low. Swettenham, commenting on the early years of Malaya

as a British colony, lamented “how little was actually known of the independent Malay States in the Malay Peninsula” (113), while Bird admitted her ignorance of the various places she visited during her trip to the Malay States, declaring how “public opinion never reaches these equatorial jungles; we are grossly ignorant of their inhabitants and their rights, of the manner in which our interference originated, and how it has been exercised” (251). Publications like *The Travellers Handbook* were thus meant to address this gap in knowledge among “tourists, business visitors and intending residents” of British Malaya in the early decades of the twentieth century, positioning itself as a guidebook that offered valuable and important advice that would assist them in adjusting to their new environment.

Yet, as Margaret Shennan notes, “Malaya has never gripped the imagination of the British nation as vividly as the splendours of the Raj or the arcane riches of China.” To members of the English middle class, “a post in the Malayan administration lacked the cache of the Indian Civil Service or the attractions of Ceylon” while “the Church of England found Muslim Malaya an unpromising mission, less rewarding than India or China...” (14). Nevertheless, as many British expatriates to Malaya discovered, the post-war “halcyon period” of the 1930s and 40s provided ample opportunities for material and social rewards (Shennan 130), with many members of the colonial Civil Service, in particular, feeling that they “were all representatives of a ruling race backed by the power and prestige of the British Empire.”⁴ Additionally, colonial society was extremely hierarchical and status-conscious, with lifestyles and friendships influenced by “occupation and a man’s position in the hierarchy” (137). Thus, unlike the saccharine sweet portrayal of multiracial unity portrayed in the previous news report from *The Illustrated London News*, the tone of snobbery and condescension apparent in *The Travellers Handbook* represents the other extreme in the British stereotypical perspective of the colonial races, one in which the inferiority of the native races is compounded by issues of social class.

The section on suggestions for the employment of servants in *The Travellers Handbook*, for instance, destabilizes the more sympathetic view of “Orientals” held by administrators like Low and Maxwell, which although cautious and suspicious, is tempered by what Bird calls “a singular kindness of heart” (Bird 319). Indeed, its tone reveals that many of the racial stereotypes established in the early years of British colonization persisted, especially with regards to the lower classes of society. The publication, for instance, describes Malay servants as “charming but work-shy”, and the “unreliability” of the Indians “who can be very good indeed, but often are not.” And while the Chinese provide “value for money” service, they still require close supervision as “one cannot expect them to conform to European standards” (19). Thus, the handbook suggests that all native servants are to be treated with distrust and detachment lest they neglect their duties, or worse, betray their colonial masters. At the core of such racial stereotyping lies the implicit assumption that these natives are

virtuous, agreeable and trustworthy not on their own terms, but only if they conform to British notions of progress and propriety, especially in advancing the aims of the civilizing mission.

In conclusion, all three written accounts provide valuable insights to the contemporary understanding of racial discourse and its influence on the ideological construct of “British Malaya” for the reading public—whether in Victorian times or our own. While Bird’s limited and mediated engagement with the native races in her travelogue resulted in a fluctuating view of the locals, her close affiliation with and observation of colonial administrators like Hugh Low and William Maxwell engendered a steadfast belief in the moral superiority of the British colonial enterprise, one that is justifiable because it is exercised with restraint and tempered by a deep understanding of and sympathy and kindness towards the native races. *The Illustrated London News* provides a brief glimpse of the role of the newspaper as an instrument of colonialist propaganda, one which attempts to consolidate British national identity through the emphasis on the mutual joy evoked by the Duke’s visit among both the British and the native peoples of Penang, albeit much less persuasively compared to Bird’s version, which succeeds due to her extended, individualized portraits of colonial administrators like Shaw, Low, and Maxwell whom she admired. Finally, despite the progressiveness of such “model administrators” in their sympathetic treatment of the native races of Malaya, the stereotyping of servants in *The Travellers Handbook to British Malaya* reveals how racial prejudice towards the local peoples remained inherent in British colonial society of the early twentieth century, one that calls into question the benevolence and compassion of the colonial endeavour that Bird so eagerly endorsed and reproduced in her narratives for her readers back home.

Notes

¹ Bird’s use of the term “Kling” here refers to people originating from the Indian subcontinent who travelled to Malaya from the 15th century onwards predominantly for trade. Famed for their entrepreneurial skills, many of them settled in Penang and became highly successful merchants, a point Bird emphasizes in *The Golden Chersonese* (238).

² <http://www.iln.org.uk>

³ From the online edition of the first issue of *The Illustrated London News* published May 14th, 1842.

⁴ Barnes, Geoffrey. *Mostly Memories: Packing and Farewells*. Mulu Press, Rosyton, Herts, 1996, cited in Sheehan 137.

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