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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Small stories of Little Britons: scale and the ethics of imperial histories

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ABSTRACT

Categories are useful but deceptive tools, enabling the historian to build totalising models of historical change that at the same time may take us further away from understanding individual and everyday experience. This article seeks to balance big and small histories, and in so doing to fracture monolithic and predetermined conceptions and mechanisms of 'British' imperial history through a reflection on the methods and messages of microhistory in a study of colonialism in north-east India. The article further draws out some of the affective implications of doing British and imperial history from an Australian perspective and with an Antipodean sensibility.

This article has been peer reviewed.

KEYWORDS

Australian history; British imperial history; ethics of history; microhistory; northeast India

'What's the difference between Australia and yoghurt?', quizzed an English academic as we sat convivially round a table at a conference dinner in London some years ago. The punch line had the Poms looking down their noses. 'Yoghurt has more culture'. Culture and history, in their view, are pretty much the same thing – how can you be a historian, another sniggered between mouthfuls of Eton mess, in a country that's barely a couple of centuries old? The history of English condescension towards Australia is, of course, a multi-volume tome.¹ Jokes about Old North Wales (as opposed to the New South variety) are similarly patronising. Across the web of colonial relationships, jokes are markers of both metropolitan arrogance and marginal inferiorities. English jokes about the Welsh have a lot in common with Australian jokes about the Kiwis. In the former British Indian Empire, Indian jokes (and by India I mean the Hindi-Hindu heartland) about the tribal peoples of their own north-east also have a deeply denigrating tone, usually involving drug taking, dog eating, sexual promiscuity, and calling them 'chinky'. If not exposed for their excessive rainfall (their towns of Mawsynram and Cherrapunji have the highest average annual rainfall of any places in the world), the people of the Khasi Hills make the papers for their idiosyncratic naming practices in which they latch on to euphonious or unusual words to form their nomenclatures.²

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¹See, for example, 'Jokes about Australians and Australian jokes,' accessed 6 May 2015, <http://www.convictcreations.com/culture/jokes.html>. See also Guy Rundle, 'What British Jokes about Australians Really Mean,' *Guardian*, 8 July 2013.

²Examples include H. Britain War Dan, Highlander Kharmalki, Hilarious Dhkar, Laborious Manik S. Syiem, Moonlight Pariat, or sisters named Million, Billion and Trillion. See Rajiv Roy, 'Of Funny Names, Surnames and More,' *Assam Times*, 25 April 2014, accessed 22 July 2015, <http://www.assamtimes.org/node/10673>. See also <http://khasi.namegenerator.ga>.

Jokes, like the accounts of events that we call history, are about differentiating, distilling, essentialising. It is all about context and perspective; identity lives and breathes in the middle ground between 'don't take yourself so seriously', 'let's all have a laugh', and 'how dare you say that'. Putting England, Wales, Australia and India in the same frame of inter-relationships and self-imaginings is my way of reflecting on particular historical sensibilities of the Antipodean historian that surface in the cross-currents of imperial histories. James Vernon seeks certainty and containment in structure, suspicious of piecemeal or episodic scenes of Britain and its world in which a throng of actors and subjects rush the stage in an ever-increasing play of colour and movement, but in which the overarching plot and narrative become lost. Yet to seek a history of Britain, as Vernon proposes, through tracking liberal political economy and its forms of governmentality, does not necessarily confirm the unimportance of individuals, as he might have it. Interpretive structures necessarily mould and contain our histories and can lend explanatory shape and power; rhetorically, at least, they also run the risk of pre-determining the story and begging the question in their tectonic abstraction. In the *Where's Wally?* of British history in its global context, the setting changes on every page, and red-herrings abound. As a blood-and-bandages object, the chief protagonist might appear predictably in every single scene, always in the end recognisable, patterned, structured. How the eponymous subject returns the gaze is another issue – 'how did *I* end up *here*?', 'how did *we* end up *there*?', are questions of small history, of personal and tailored stories, of histories and trajectories that matter to individuals as much as communities. Imagination, choice, the courage to think and act differently and to change – all begin in single actions and insignificant places.

It is in these methodological inflections, for the purposes of this discussion, that a number of themes have taken shape out of my own research into British imperial ideologies and practices in the north-east of India in the nineteenth century. Most particularly, as an Australian and as an historian, my approach draws on family experiences of colonial diaspora, and the troubling feeling I have of writing one people's histories while living on land stolen from another. In this way my histories, like those of many non-Indigenous Australian historians, are attempts to understand the past as well as the self along a continuum of un-settlement as well as integration, constitutive of a kind of insider/outsider normality that makes up the meaning of being Antipodean. The aftermath of empire, I conclude, needs constant renegotiation.³ In this article, therefore, a set of musings illuminates in turn questions of scale, belief, family and identity in shading the history of Britain and its imperial formations. Collectively, I argue that neither the macro nor the micro should be a privileged optic. A surfeit of stories does not mean more clearly distilled narratives, in the same way that a structuring up of the past may not give explanatory power to understanding local specificities. Rather, the importance of both individuals and of structural configurations can be held, gingerly, in the same interpretive frame.

³Andrew J. May, *Welsh Missionaries and British Imperialism: The Empire of Clouds in North-east India* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2012), 285.

Scale

Stories about places are, of necessity, shaped and bounded by temporal and spatial scales. The Khasi Hills, the subject of some of my recent work, are located in Meghalaya, which has a Christian population of over 70 per cent, in a country where the overall figure is less than two per cent. English is the official language, and out of a population of nearly three million people, 45 per cent are Khasi, 27 per cent Garo, 18 per cent Bengali, and 8 per cent Nepali. In the fashion of British explorer narratives, Richard Eilers recently reported in the *Guardian* on 'India's undiscovered gem: the hills of Meghalaya', an idyllic world where 'women own the land, Christianity dominates and the landscape is straight out of the Hobbit'. Some readers took the article as an informative travelogue, but others were much more ambivalent about the cheery version of Meghalaya painted by the journalist: one regarded Shillong as a place ruined by rampant over-development and a welfare culture; a second deplored the prevalence of drug addiction and the loss of 'their original culture ... torn between the old, christian [sic] and Indian identities'; a third opined that the very 'pristine places and untouched cultures' celebrated in the article would be ruined by any influx of tourists. Others still were more openly critical of Eilers' approach: 'Meghalaya is hardly "undiscovered", is it? – Tutankhamun's tomb was undiscovered, as were the Terracotta Warriors, but plenty of your fellow human beings live in Meghalaya. I wonder how they would take the news that nobody had discovered their home'.⁴

The discovery of other people, put another way, is merely an act of *self*-knowledge. The intrusion into so-called unknown lands and cultures – rather than being a masterly performance of imperial power and survey, intrepid journalistic planeteeering, or acquisitive intellectual reach – is just another caravanserai for the wayfaring self. There's a particular place, a flat rock at the end of the plateau at Cherrapunji in the Khasi Hills where I like to go and sit, and also rest there in my mind's eye, taking in the view. This is at the back of the now derelict and deserted compound of one Harry Inglis at a place called Kut Madan (meaning the edge of the earth in Khasi), perched right at the southern tip of the plain at Cherrapunji at the edge of India itself where the flat plateau abruptly gives way to the precipice and where, on a clear day, the plains of Sylhet in Bangladesh are laid out like a shimmering quilt below. Harry Inglis was a notorious merchant and bully boy in the Khasi Hills in the 1830s and 1840s, the Indian-born son of a Scottish lime merchant and an Indian mother. He died in London in 1860, and his body was sent back to the Khasi Hills, pickled in a barrel. In 1862, Harry's widow Sophie installed his corpse standing up in a glass coffin in the verandah at Kut Madan, telling the Khasis 'that he would rise from the dead and avenge himself on any person who wronged her'. Sophie's logic played on the fear the Khasis still felt of Harry's power, even in death. Under Harry's agreements with the Khasis, his leases on the orange groves were good for his lifetime, which in Khasi translated as 'for as long as he remained above the ground'.

⁴*Guardian*, 1 February 2013; Blog posts by Losdiablo, 2 February 2013, 22:51; beaskies, 2 February 2013, 23:49; jayjaycee, 3 February 2013, 21:37; ArunShourie, 4 February 2013, 19:53. For the article and subsequent blog posts, accessed 30 April 2015, <http://www.theguardian.com/travel/2013/feb/01/meghalaya-north-east-india-state>.

Suffice to say that the role and legacy of the British (or the 'Britishers', as they are more usually called) still very much resonates in the Khasi Hills today, most recently in reconsiderations of the 26th Khasi Labour Corps who died fighting for British India during the Great War. But Cherrapunji might only cross the lips of Indians more broadly as a meteorological curiosity, having the highest rainfall of any village in the world. Being up on the mountain looking down is a strange feeling – as out of the way a place as you might possibly think you might reach, this end of the earth stands for the stretch of the British Empire, all the insignificant places unknown, unseen, uncared for and about whose rich myths there is general ignorance, but where things of great symbolic importance for Britain happen and have happened. Cherrapunji sits in that system of colonial encounter that nearly three decades of scholarship have placed in networks and webs, hubs and nodes – the systems of resourcing, exchange and subordination (always contested by subject peoples) that sustained empire's interests.

The themes that set the scene for this discussion of histories of empire and the larger British world might at the outset baffle many of us with their breadth and implication. I think I often fear what many historians fear when we sit down at our desks or in our archives and wonder, how can we cope with the enormity of this history? The history of Britain on a global scale no less – from Boudica to Gallipoli, from BCE to infinity – how can we cope with this gargantuan audit of everywhere, everything, every time? I am not a 'Global Historian'. Most of us, I wager, mostly feel like lower-case historians rather than capital G and capital H Global Historians. We fear the possibility that what we know or hold dear about places, individuals, identities, will become lost in the fog of extraction and quantification. Does the history of everything run the risk of becoming the history of nothing in particular? Is a history of everywhere actually a history of nowhere?

Global and World History have of course meant different things to different people at different times. A variety of approaches have sought to unhitch it from what Bentley calls its ideological birthmarks – its 'Eurocentric assumptions and a fixation on the nation-state as the default and even natural category of historical analysis'.⁵ Over recent years the genre has been able to make more generous room for the local, while not ignoring the need to keep in the frame larger connections and processes beyond purely local cultural determinants, as well as situating the local or regional in larger transnational or global frameworks. While this is not unproblematic in itself, what it does do, as Bentley argues, is enable historians 'to deal analytically with a range of large-scale processes such as mass migrations, campaigns of imperial expansion, cross-cultural trade, environmental changes, biological exchanges, transfers of technology, and cultural exchanges, including the spread of ideas, ideals, ideologies, religious faiths, and cultural traditions'.⁶

To take a synoptic approach, I would argue, is not to be proud or imperious ourselves. We might attempt to write history from a commanding point of view, but this should always make us feel small rather than powerful. Like nature's beauty and terror,

⁵Jerry H. Bentley, 'The Task of World History,' in *Oxford Handbook of World History*, ed. Jerry H. Bentley (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 2.

⁶*Ibid.*, 12–13.

sitting on the rock at Kut Madan looking down over the precipice, the past should rightly overwhelm us. Our history should be disturbing, like vertigo. Global historical thinking, like any other sort of history making, is still also a collaboration and a conversation. Each of us seeks a starting point and an ending point – where is *your* rock, how can you engage with the synoptic, the comparative, the abstracted, while being rooted in particular moments and places? Who is sitting next to you sharing the view?

With more political urgency, historians of empire, as Ahmed argues, must ‘plant our historiographical feet in the frontier space of [the] present-day’.⁷ Using vernacular as well as official sources to disrupt imperial narratives also places the frontier at the centre of its own history; in other words, insisting, for example, on Asia-normative history that is comprehensible and sensitive to its historical subjects.⁸ While we thirst for import and impact, we do not necessarily need to be virtuosi or encyclopedists, intimidating with our grand and sweeping gestures, all that knowledge at our fingertips. The mere hint of a distant tune caught fleetingly on the breeze can be as telling as the grandest orchestral cacophony. Global History is subtle as well as searching. As Giorgio Riello has noted, it is a history in which you know what to leave out as well as what to put in.⁹

Global History or World History has also often and pejoratively meant the history of the foreign, viewed from the ledge of Europe as the bedrock of history and civilisation. A German historian writes recently of Nellie Melba as ‘the icon of a new cultural self-confidence in her reputedly uncouth homeland’.¹⁰ It is that yoghurt and culture thing again. ‘As far as I am able to judge’, opined Vinay Lal more forcefully a decade ago, “‘world history’ informs the greater part of the people in the world that the only history they have is to catch up to someone else’s history, or else they themselves will become history’.¹¹ ‘Where *does* the world historian write from?’, asks Richard Drayton. Here he demands a post-patriotic imperial history, a history not simply of reflection, but engaged in ‘the business of speaking aloud to those alive and those to come about the past’.¹² This post-patriotic formulation, argues Drayton, should be painful for the historian. If, as he suggests, we are to ‘lower the frontier between the self and the foreign’ – indeed, ‘to “go native” at the centre of empire’,¹³ in order to account for globalisation’s unvoiced victims, then issues of conflict and of belief are not just objective categories of analysis – they unsettle us inside, as humans and as historians.

⁷Manan Ahmed, ‘Adam’s Mirror: The Frontier in the Imperial Imagination,’ *Economic & Political Weekly* 46, no. 13 (2011): 60.

⁸Luke Closely, ‘Asia-centred Approaches to the History of the Early Modern World: A Methodological Romp,’ in *Comparative Early Modernities: 1100–1800*, ed. David Porter (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 73–98, cited in K. Jackson, ‘Hearing Images, Tasting Pictures: Making sense of Christian Mission Photography in the Lushai Hills District, Northeast India (1870–1920),’ in *From Dust to Digital*, ed. M. Kominko (Cambridge: Open Book Publishers, 2015), 449.

⁹Giorgio Riello, ‘Cotton: The Fabric that Made the World,’ presentation in the School of Historical and Philosophical Studies, The University of Melbourne, September 19, 2013.

¹⁰Jürgen Osterhammel, *The Transformation of the World: A Global History of the Nineteenth Century* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2014, first published in German, 2009), 6.

¹¹Vinay Lal, ‘Provincialising the West: World History from the Perspective of Indian History,’ in *Writing World History 1800–2000*, ed. Benedikt Stuchtey and Eckhardt Fuchs (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 288.

¹²Richard Drayton, ‘Where Does the World Historian Write From? Objectivity, Moral Conscience and the Past and Present of Imperialism,’ *Journal of Contemporary History* 46, no. 3 (2011): 672.

¹³*Ibid.*, 684, 685.

For me it is microhistory's ethnography of everyday life that can resist the 'gigantification of historical scale'¹⁴ and also, importantly, contest the kinds of generalisations that would have various imperial functionaries – whether administrators, missionaries, rajahs or redcoats – as cardboard cut-outs playing predetermined roles in scripted imperial dramas. Life on the frontier and in the interstices of empire has always been more complicated than that. The scale of global history often seems to imply the imposition of order and authority. Yet thinking small, for István Szijártó, has four key assets: 'it is appealing to the general public, it is realistic, it conveys personal experience and whatever it has in its focus, the lines branching out from this reach very far'.¹⁵ Here the micro builds and deconstructs the macro through individual action and agency. Looking down from the edge of the Meghalayan tableland, the bigger the scale appears, the easier we can lapse into shorthand; the grander the panorama, the greater the possibility not just that the detail gets foggier, but that important constituent parts get lost altogether. As Ballantyne and Burton put it more eloquently, tracking empires in this fashion is 'one way of reimagining the world's history so that both its monumental quality and its ultimately fragmented character can be captured simultaneously'.¹⁶ It is in this sense that small histories again challenge and interrogate larger ones.

Of course, just as small histories need to reach out to larger optics, big histories do not in and of themselves avoid narrowness of view. Whether termed the British Isles, or the sub-subcontinental Atlantic Archipelago advanced by J. G. A. Pocock, the *parochial* that is literally rearranged in the word *archipelago* can still too easily be a restricted view and not the inherently diverse and expanded remit for the analysis of cultural configuration and development that Pocock intended.¹⁷ A recent report elicits conservative fright at the 'end of history'.¹⁸ In claiming the absence of a core canon of British history in the undergraduate curricula of Australian universities, it argues that such a gap will mean a generation of Australian students 'will have a narrow and fragmented grasp' of their heritage and 'lack an understanding of the institutions that have made Australia free and prosperous'. Yet 40 years ago, in the supposed 'good old days' in the decades prior to the 1980s when the University of Melbourne offered a 'full history course' of subjects including *British History 1485–1700*, *Modern Britain 1815–1940*, and *Australian History 1788–1960*, Pocock was already arguing for a new approach; not just a four nations approach that took account of Wales, Scotland and Ireland, but a consideration of Antipodean history which avoided the insularity of appealing to stock tropes of Britishness and British history and 'which treats our derivation by placing it in a context of inherent diversity, replacing the image of a monolithic "parent society" with that of an expanding zone of cultural conflict and creation'.¹⁹ Being there first – the primacy of the British mother ship – has long been

¹⁴Edward Muir, 'Introduction: Observing Trifles,' in *Microhistory and the Lost Peoples of Europe*, ed. Edward Muir and Guido Ruggiero (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1991), xxi.

¹⁵István Szijártó, 'Four Arguments for Microhistory,' *Rethinking History* 6, no. 2 (2002): 209.

¹⁶Tony Ballantyne and Antoinette Burton, 'Introduction: Bodies, Empires, and World Histories,' in *Bodies in Contact: Rethinking Colonial Encounters in World History*, ed. Tony Ballantyne and Antoinette Burton (Durham: Duke University Press, 2005), 4.

¹⁷J.G.A. Pocock, 'British History: A Plea for a New Subject,' *Journal of Modern History* 47, no. 4 (1975): 606.

¹⁸Stephanie Forrest, Chris Berg and Hannah Pandel, 'The End of History ... in Australian Universities,' Institute of Public Affairs, July 2015.

¹⁹Pocock, 'British History,' 620.

a less interesting historical claim than looking at the ways in which identities are variously and globally reformulated. 'Having a first', as Daves Rossel so aptly states, 'is not like winning a race but rather like being part of a far more general exultation in innovation and novelty'.²⁰

Belief

'The religion of this people – if so it may be called', noted an anonymous commentator in 1852 writing about the Khasis with a heavy dose of cultural absolutism, 'is nothing more than a contemptible demon worship; and an occasional wealth-seeking bribe to an imaginary goddess, under the misnomer *sacrifice*'.²¹ Over a decade ago now I first sat down with the then 83-year-old Father Sylvanus Sngi Lyngdoh, Professor of Scripture at Sacred Heart Theological College, Shillong; faith healer, exorcist, Salesian priest, author, theologian, linguist. I wanted to know how a Catholic priest could still be a faith healer and how ovomancy and chicken sacrifice could still be *de rigueur* in the context of the Catholic liturgy. 'Tribal religions are the dawn', asserted Sngi, 'Christianity is the day'. For Khasi Christians, their traditional animistic beliefs were preparatory for Christianity; Jesus came to perfect their religion. In other words, they were never 'converted' to anything, so therefore we might ask, who is catching up with whose history?²² The point to be made here is that in any reckoning of the British world, it is risky to think about Christianity – or any ism or ology for that matter – in absolute and totalising terms.

I take another cue here from Natalie Zemon Davis, who among others urges a 'decentering' of history, geographically as well as socially, and with multiple voices. Such history, she argues, 'is always relational: the history of women involves men, the history of peasants involves proprietors; the history of workers involves employers'.²³ As Davis further advises, the Western historian should not simply see non-European cultures as precursors of the European, but as 'absolutely simultaneous, radically contemporaneous'.²⁴ From a related viewpoint, there are more Presbyterians now in the church in north-east India than in all the chapels of Wales. Furthermore, when taking belief into account, we might consider the interconnectedness of Christianity and indigenous spirit beliefs, so that we might expand our understanding of the anthropology of religion that usually ignores the variety in local Christian experience and understanding of conversion, ritual and orthodoxy.

Other aspects of culture are, of course, mutually constructed between the British and their subject peoples. The predominant narrative of both new and old histories of

²⁰Daves Rossell, comment on Street Lighting discussion, posted 1 July 1996, H-URBAN discussion log, accessed 10 April 2006, <http://www.h-net.org/~urban>.

²¹'W', 'Historical Fragments,' *Calcutta Christian Observer*, March 1852, 132.

²²'Tribal Religions are the Dawn, Christianity is the Day,' UCA News, 30 August 2000, accessed 6 May 2015, http://www.ucanews.com/story-archive/?post_name=/2000/08/30/tribal-religions-are-the-dawn-christianity-is-the-day&post_id=1907.

²³Natalie Zemon Davis, 'Decentering History: Local Stories and Cultural Crossings in a Global World,' *History and Theory* 50 (2011): 190. The history of railway men, observes Vernon, might be usefully explored through the endeavours of women who nursed the victims of the nineteenth century's railway accidents: James Vernon, workshop commentary, 'Writing Modern British History Today: An Antipodean Workshop,' State Library of New South Wales, 8 May 2015.

²⁴Davis, 'Decentering History,' 191.

the Khasi mission is the central role of Welshman Thomas Jones as founding missionary and bringer of the book: the architect of the Christianisation of the hill tribes, the 'father' of Khasi literature who put the Khasi language into written form using Welsh orthography. The heroic version of Thomas Jones as cultural saviour occludes the lineage of debts, relationships and negotiations in which indigenous peoples played an active role in shaping cultural and spiritual outcomes, however difficult it is to hear Khasi voices in the archive. Translation, as Jane Samson has noted of Pacific languages, involved a process of 'mutual conversion'. The missionary was required to gain a sophisticated understanding of the traditions of the people he proselytised if he was to achieve any degree of linguistic sophistication in their tongue. Citing Vicente Rafael, Samson asserts the need for more complex readings of the interactions that take place in the process: 'translation and conversion produce the vernacular as that which simultaneously institutes *and* subverts colonial rule'.²⁵ Recent scholarship by Gail MacLeitch (on the Iroquois) and Tony Ballantyne (on the Maori) regarding the entanglements of empire in other spheres throws particular light on the north-east of India, whereby asymmetrical interactions between imperialist and tribal subject can be seen to produce convergent and collaborative modes of practice and belief.²⁶ Such a perspective challenges assumptions about the presumed nature of traditional institutions within tribal society and presents a clearer picture of the ways in which colonised peoples have used the new material circumstances produced by colonialism to bargain with the state in claiming resources and attempting to secure political gains.

Family

Two boys played along the road on an early morning at Cherrapunji when I first visited over a decade ago, spinning an iron wheel with a stick, rolling it past ancient megaliths called *maw bynnai* (memory stones), the meanings of which most people have forgotten. The wheel of life and the wheel of history turn anew. What do they care for British History? What does British History care for them? There are lots of little people in my histories of British imperialism in north-east India. Empire on show is often a grand performance, sometimes improvised, often scripted carefully in bold words and gestures of power and influence. But for many men, women and children of empire, it could often seem that no one was watching. Behind the scenes, removed of glitter and pretence, it could be a fearful and lonely avocation for neglected missionary children or for the wives of Company bureaucrats.

Certainly, there is a danger, as Bentley warns, that to focus on the lives of the marginal, while it may provide potent social critique and furnish relevant histories that can mesh with contemporary identity politics, runs the risk of neglecting macro scales and

²⁵Vicente Rafael, *Contracting Colonialism: Translation and Christian Conversion in Tagalog Society under Early Spanish Rule* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1988), xv, cited in Jane Samson, 'Translation Teams: Missionaries, Islanders, and the Reduction of Language in the Pacific,' in *Missionaries, Indigenous Peoples and Cultural Exchange*, ed. Patricia Grimshaw and Andrew May (Brighton: Sussex University Press, 2010), 97.

²⁶Gail D. MacLeitch, *Imperial Entanglements: Iroquois Change and Persistence on the Frontiers of Empire* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2011); Tony Ballantyne, *Entanglements of Empire: Missionaries, Maori, and the Question of the Body* (Auckland, N.Z.: Auckland University Press, 2015).

processes that construct individual experience at the local level.²⁷ But the converse is also true – that a history in which individuals do not recognise themselves is a rather pointless one. History is not just for historians – an essential truth whether we like it or not is that history is also about how the past makes people in the present feel about themselves as individuals and communities. He loved us, Father Sngi tells me of Thomas Jones. He esteemed us. He was practically one of us, hence a local story that he married a Khasi girl.

In 1841, U Juncha, a man from the Diengdoh clan, taught Thomas Jones to speak the local language. In a rooftop bar at a local cafe near Hauz Khas Village in Delhi, surrounded by the Indian nouveau riche with a smattering of French arms dealers, Spanish cops, and Russian call girls, I recently shared a drink with Wanphrang Diengdoh, a young Khasi filmmaker and clan descendant of U Juncha. I am writing histories, he is making films. We are carrying on the conversation of our ancestors, and at the same time still co-producing identities in which the 'Britisher' is an ingredient.

These spaces resonant of Empire are inhabited by the family legacies of colonialism, and the connection between intimate or private memories and public debates about colonial history and its aftermath. It is in this way that our histories can pursue 'the radical potential of family history'²⁸ in an imperial context, exploring the social practices that lay behind British presence in north-east India, and framing new critical questions about families and colonialism that concern disquiet with inherited family histories in the 'long shadow of the British empire'.²⁹ As in other postcolonial settings, such histories are mediated through colonial archives and guarded stories, they can involve the generational consequences of mixed-race identity and the ways in which indigenous adoptees 'simultaneously exist in multiple spaces',³⁰ and they are contested in places of pain and shame (cemeteries, battle or massacre sites, places of internment, monuments to martyrs) which serve different political and cultural functions for the inheritors of the colonised or the coloniser.³¹

Graeme Davison is, I think, correct in saying that 'it is not necessary to love or respect one's ancestors in order to want to know their story'.³² Story-telling, as Samuel and Thompson reminded us a quarter of a century ago, is a kind of common ground between oral history and psychoanalysis, and in family history we are often torn between the urge to tell and the need to forget. They usefully identify the 'residues of a magical world' – destiny, fate, coincidence, the talisman – that sit under the surface of our narratives, and our task is not to determine fact from fiction, but to be self-aware about the ways in which mythologies are internalised and naturalised.³³ Our identity

²⁷Bentley, 'The Task of World History,' 11.

²⁸Tanya Evans, 'Secrets and Lies: The Radical Potential of Family History,' *History Workshop Journal* 71, no. 1 (2011): 49–73.

²⁹Juliette Bridgette Milner-Thornton, *The Long Shadow of the British Empire: The Ongoing Legacies of Race and Class in Zambia* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011); and following a trajectory established by Elizabeth Buettner, *Empire Families: Britons and Late Imperial India* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004).

³⁰Leilani Holmes, *Ancestry of Experience: A Journey into Hawaiian Ways of Knowing* (University of Hawaii Press, 2012).

³¹William Logan and Keir Reeves, eds, *Places of Pain and Shame: Dealing with 'Difficult Heritage'* (London: Routledge, 2009).

³²Graeme Davison, 'Ancestors: The Broken Lineage of Family History,' in *The Use and Abuse of Australian History* (St Leonards: Allen & Unwin, 2000), 98.

³³Raphael Samuel and Paul Thompson, *The Power of Family Myths* (Routledge: London and New York, 1990), 10.

as expressed through life stories fixes us culturally, but also separates us as individuals.³⁴ If versions of nation are ways of styling and scaling family, then in the words of Deborah Cohen, 'telling the family's secrets works for us moderns in much the same way as keeping them did for the Victorians: it forges the bonds of kin'.³⁵ Once it was anathema to look too far up the family tree, but perhaps a particular Antipodean sensibility has been the notion that it was all too easy to get away with burying unwieldy origins or hiding unwanted pasts in hard to reach branches.

Identity

Identity, in the British context, has manifold ethnic dimensions. 'What's the best thing to come out of Wales?', the English ask their colonised neighbours: 'The M4'. As colonised colonisers, the Welsh established their Indian mission in the Khasi Hills for a variety of reasons: 'many of our friends had felt,' explained mission secretary John Roberts, 'I was nearly saying instinctively (for you know the Welsh are very fond of hilly countries) – a strong inclination to establish our first settlement there'.³⁶ But it was more than just an affinity with hills and rain. The Welsh established their own foreign mission after candidates for the London Missionary Society (LMS) were rejected time after time, for the Welsh a clear indication of deep-seated ethnic prejudice. The Reverend David Charles articulated the frustration of a constituency which, despite supporting the LMS financially, was increasingly feeling disenfranchised and aggrieved:

whatever the sums might have been, they were obtained by much gratuitous ministerial exertion, – not in rich populous cities – but from a population covering many hundred miles. They were not the exsuscencies [sic] of excessive capitals, nor the surplus of the superabundance of lucrative commerce, but they were the collective droppings from brows seldom dry from the sweat of extreme labour, and were augmented by many a last mite of pious poverty ... Not a stone of the many hundred chapels they have erected has been laid with English money. No cases from them have been cringing at the doors of the rich citizens on the banks of the Thames. No sums have crossed the Severn to their assistance.³⁷

Aled Jones has suggested that the extraordinary historiographical silence in twentieth-century Wales about its mission in India related, as much as anything, to the views of a modern, secular and most of all nationalist society for whom any notion of complicity in the broader British imperial project was anathema.³⁸ The rise of post-colonial studies and a growing interest in the Welsh diaspora have now given such studies new cogency. Scholars have also been reformulating the ways in which trajectories of empire have been multilateral; how the Welsh, Irish and Scots, as particular ethnic constituents of the British, have had their own distinctive relationships with that

³⁴Jeremy D. Popkin, *History, Historians and Autobiography* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 280.

³⁵Deborah Cohen, *Family Secrets: Shame and Privacy in Modern Britain* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 264.

³⁶John Roberts to John Wilson, 2 December 1841, National Library of Wales, CMA 28720.

³⁷David Charles to Directors of the London Missionary Society, August 1822, copy in National Library of Wales, CMA 27159.

³⁸Aled Jones, 'Welsh Missionary Journalism in India, 1880–1947,' in *Imperial Co-histories: National Identities and the British and Colonial Press*, ed. Julie F. Codell (Madison, N.J.: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2003), 243.

empire, with its indigenous peoples, and with translocations of the meanings of their ethnic identities abroad.³⁹

In my own childhood, contingent British identities swirled across my family's diaspora – a 'Scottish' mother (who left the country when she was four years old), a 'Welsh' granny (who despite her name Gwenllian and her ability to speak the language, barely set foot in the country). A photograph of my mother from the 1930s taken in a suburban backyard in Adelaide shows a young girl in Welsh 'national dress': tall black chimney hat over white cap, white blouse, check skirt. They were always Celtic in temper, adamantly anti-English, circumstantially Australian, yet located precariously in the British penumbra, that almost-shade of cultural uncertainty that blurred the edges of identity. Following a 1947 Commonwealth conference, member states decided to replace the former general colonial status of 'British subject' with more specific citizenship requirements. Britain, Australia and New Zealand respectively passed the *British Nationality Act*, *Nationality and Citizenship Act*, and *British Nationality and New Zealand Citizenship Act*, and in following decades stricter measures were applied to 'British subjects' from other Commonwealth countries seeking entry into Britain. When my granny's sister Margaret Cattell-Jones applied for a pension in Adelaide in 1961, it was not just her financial interests that were scrutinised: 'The magistrate ... even questioned her right to call herself a British Subject as she was born in India!! Poor Aunty was terribly upset when she came back ... She also told him that there was no question of her not being a British subject when she entered Australia 33 years ago!!'⁴⁰ A history of Britain must account for its regionality – not just internally, but in the peculiar formations of its constituent parts.

Any history of Britain must position its imperial descendants, triangulating a landscape of Britishness in general, and in particular the locations and experiences of peoples who might have experienced power in some ways in colonial settings, but whose livelihoods, socio-economic status and identities had diverse trajectories. Histories of empire have never been more relevant to British self-fashioning. For Aled Jones, the history of the Welsh missionaries is inescapably a story about the Welsh themselves. 'Only by telling their story in this way', he demands, 'can the Welsh, finally, bring their missionaries home'.⁴¹ The idea of Britain in the world may be a separate project from a history of Britain, but at the core of a new approach lies an understanding of the ways in which the world made Britain.

'Worlding', as noted earlier, indeed reeks of the Anglophone on centre stage, and any conceptual gazetteer of the British world would need to account for multiple, complex and essentialised versions of nation and identity. Chakrabarty's notion of 'asym-metric ignorance'⁴² is applicable to axes of cultural, political and racial thought

³⁹Tadhg Foley and Maureen O'Connor, eds, *Ireland and India: Colonies, Culture and Empire* (Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 2006); John M. MacKenzie, 'Irish, Scottish, Welsh and English Worlds? A Four-Nation Approach to the History of the British Empire,' *History Compass* 6, no. 5 (2008): 1244–63; Chris Evans, *Slave Wales: The Welsh and Atlantic Slavery, 1660–1850* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2010); Barry Crosbie, *Irish Imperial Networks: Migration, Social Communication and Exchange in Nineteenth-century India* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012).

⁴⁰G.A. McLean to S. May, 9 March 1961, author's possession.

⁴¹Jones, 'Welsh Missionary Journalism in India, 1880–1947,' 266.

⁴²Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincialising Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference*, revised ed. (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2008), 28.

between Europe and the non-western world, within the four nations of Britain itself, but also in regard to racial and cultural difference and discrimination in contemporary India. 'Worlding Wales', according to Owain ap Griffith, is to view Wales not simply in narrow binary terms – as marginal (and always oppressed) in relation to its English neighbours – but in a broader space in which the nation is produced via other encounters, 'as being resistant and complicit, often in the same movement'.⁴³ Wales, suggests ap Griffith, is therefore 'post-provincial...articulating global processes within a localised space'.⁴⁴

As Catherine Macmillan has noted,⁴⁵ stereotypical depictions of the Welsh in popular culture such as the TV show 'The Indian Doctor' perpetuate the trope of the Welsh as 'rural, backward, passionate and depraved, in contrast to the supposedly urban, modern, rational and sophisticated English'. And here too is an Orientalist role reversal, the Indian doctor as sophisticate, the Welsh as uncivilised and rusticated. Kamini asks a local shopkeeper about places of entertainment for local women:

Kamini: Where do they go to get their minds off things?

Mrs. Davies: Pontypridd.

Kamini: Is that a big place?

Mrs. Davies: Yes

Kamini: So they've got theatres, opera, that sort of thing?

Mrs Davies: No. They've got bingo ...

In 2014, the season trailer for *Kaun Banega Crorepati* (the Indian 'Who Wants to be a Millionaire') picked up on tensions around racial difference within the country as a whole. When the game show host asks contestant Poornima (identifiable to an Indian audience as a north-easterner) where the town of Kohima (the hill capital of the north-eastern Indian state of Nagaland) is located – China, Nepal or India – Poornima looks confused, and puts the question to an audience poll, which shows that 100% of people think Kohima is in India. 'Everyone knows this', chides the host in Hindi; 'Everyone knows it', says Poornima, 'but how many believe it?' Jokes aside, what do the British, whoever they are, *believe* about the British world?

Stranger in my land (2014), a short film by Duyu Tabyo, responds to the murder of an 18-year-old boy from Arunachal Pradesh in Delhi after being subjected to racial abuse.⁴⁶ Protests against the killing were reported internationally; BBC News Asia noted that the 'hate crime' exposed the widespread racism and discrimination experienced by indigenous minorities from the north-east of India. Vignettes from Tabyo's film, set in Delhi, see a neighbour complain about the smell of 'uncivilised' food being cooked by two girls from the north-east; a young woman from Mizoram is treated as a

⁴³Owain L. Ap Gareth, 'Welshing on Postcolonialism: Complicity and Resistance in the Construction of Welsh Identities' (PhD thesis, Department of International Politics, University of Wales Aberystwyth University of Wales Aberystwyth, 2009), 39, accessed 5 May 2015, <http://cadair.aber.ac.uk/dspace/bitstream/handle/2160/1897/Phd?sequence=3>.

⁴⁴Citing I. Bala, 'Horizon Wales: Visual Art and the Postcolonial?', in *Postcolonial Wales*, ed. Jane Aaron and Chris Williams (Cardiff: University of Wales Press: 2005), 234.

⁴⁵Catherine Macmillan, 'Orientalising the Occident? Portrayals of the Welsh in "The Indian Doctor"', *Romanian Journal of English Studies* 10, no. 1 (2013), doi: 10.2478/rjes-2013-0003.

⁴⁶Duyu Tabyo, *Stranger in My Land*, A CoreConcept Production, in association with Padi Genda Pictures, 2014.

foreigner by a prospective employer; and the hypocrisy of railing against racism against Indians in Australia ('Even after 65 years of independence these foreigners haven't changed their attitude towards us') is juxtaposed with inaction against the murder of a 'chinky' girl and the general harassment of tribal women in the capital. In the opening voiceover, we hear the central character, a young man from Arunachal Pradesh, penning a letter to the then Prime Minister Dr Manmohan Singh in protest against the racism inflicted on his tribal countrymen and countrywomen.

The relationship between 'periphery' and 'centre' is further disrupted, as Kate Fullagar's work amply shows, when the two worlds collide in person.⁴⁷ When Serampore missionary Alexander Lish took a group of Khasi youths to Calcutta in 1836, the *Friend of India* narrated the excursion as a disciplinary exercise in which the might and authority of the metropole would humble them. A tour of the principal public, educational, military and commercial buildings was calculated 'to enlarge their conceptions of the triumphs of science, and the power which it imparts to those who possess it'. While exemplary, such power was perhaps never intended to be placed in their hands, but rather to reinforce their distance from it. What was selected by the paper to have made the most impression, however, was a military review and mock battle: 'The Khasias are independent-spirited highlanders, and are loathe to admit the idea of supremacy or superiority in any other people whatever. But the array of the review at once filled them with admiration, and struck them with awe'. After a private audience with Governor-General Bentinck, Lish and his Khasi youths returned to the hills with a large number of books, but with little more access to the powerful spoils of science than when they arrived.⁴⁸ In 1837, when Emily Eden, sister of incoming Governor-General Lord Auckland, wrote of the students of Calcutta's Hindu College, she crystallised this view that government patronage in providing a liberal education to Indian students using the medium of English was as much about maintaining racialised categories as encouraging their permeability:

they are 'British subjects,' inasmuch as Britain has taken India, and in many respects they may be called well-educated young men; but still I cannot tell you what the wide difference is between a European and a Native. An elephant and Chance [her dog], St. Paul's and a Baby-Home, the Jerseys and Pembrokes, a diamond and a bad flint, Queen Adelaide and O'Connell, London and Calcutta, are not further apart, and more antipathetic than those two classes. I do not see how the prejudices ever can wear out, nor do I see that it is very desirable.⁴⁹

In the present day, textbooks from the Indian National Council of Educational Research put the likes of Emily Eden squarely back in history's place, yet still elide the history and culture of the country's own north-east.

⁴⁷Kate Fullagar, *The Savage Visit: New World People and Popular Imperial Culture in Britain, 1710–1795* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012).

⁴⁸*Friend of India*, 14 January 1836, 11.

⁴⁹Miss Eden to Mrs Lister, 25 January 1837, in Violet Dickinson, ed., *Miss Eden's Letters* (London, 1919), 281–2.

Conclusion

With its power, influence, and force of example, it would be 'capricious', claims Jürgen Osterhammel, 'to sketch a history of the nineteenth century, of all periods, that disregarded the centrality of Europe'.⁵⁰ Maybe so, but it would be equally laughable not to seek other views. As we sit on the rocky edge at the back of Kut Madan, we need to be suspicious of certainties. The Great Assam Earthquake of 1897 shifted the whole topography of a vast epicentral region in the Khasi Hills, causing destruction across an area the size of England. Mountains moved, readjusted. Where we place ourselves imaginatively influences our view, what we write, *how* we write. This is what I have learned from India's north-east. We need a view that can take account of patchwork cultural and emotional sovereignties rather than nation states, that does not essentialise, that resists the mental mapping of spatially articulated hierarchies of centre or periphery. British and Australian, English and Welsh, Indian and Britisher, Hindi-Hindu or tribal, if we are misunderstood or incomprehensible to others, the jokes will sting. And so we might suspend disbelief, descend into the territory of other people's self-fashioning and imaginary, laughing at ourselves as much as others.⁵¹ Meet the ancestors as well as the extended family, but take care in 'discovering' other people's history. In engineering the past, stories never get in the way of structures; they temper and balance them, undergird their certainties, activating and amplifying the architecture of place, process and identity.

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⁵⁰Osterhammel, *The Transformation of the World*, xx.

⁵¹Aruni Kashyap, 'Where The Sun Rises: The Peripheral Imagination, Writing the "Invisible" India,' *The North-East Blog*, 1 June 2012, accessed 22 July 2015, <http://ibnlive.in.com/group-blog/The-North-East-Blog/3304/where-the-sun-rises-the-peripheral-imagination-writing-the-invisible-india/63572.html>.

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