

**Of *Misses* and *Tuan Kechils*:  
Colonial Childhood Memoirs as  
Cultural Mediation in British Malaya**

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To be a child ... is to be an exile, an exile haunted with vanishing intimations and relics of another life and of a far happier state of being. (de la Mare *Childhood in Poetry*)

From the critical standpoint of postcolonial criticism, one cannot but be startled by the number of colonial memoirs published since the last decade of the 20th century dealing with the experience of the British children across the Empire.<sup>1</sup> Margaret Shennan observes, “In the past century the British appear to have been driven by a compulsion to put into words their experiences and perceptions of life in the East” (*Out in the Midday Sun* 1). While the experience of the British in India, the Jewel in the Crown, has been extensively analysed, the lives of the British who lived in other South East Asian colonies have received less critical attention. This article focuses on the infrequently considered narratives of the British in Malaya. Malaya has stimulated a mass of literature, both fiction and non-fiction, as many British expatriates wrote letters home or kept a diary to be turned later into a memoir (Shennan *Out in Midday Sun* 1). Specifically, a number of narratives focus on what it was like to grow up in British Malaya.<sup>2</sup> British children, transformed into little Misses and little Lords (*Missees* and *Tuan Kechils*, as they were called by the servants), led idyllic lives in their early years. British Malaya was a paradise, which, inevitably, came to an abrupt ending with the Second World War (*Out in Midday Sun* 208). Margaret Shennan, Derek Tait, Geoffrey Barnes, and Blake Bromley recreate their childhood years in Malaya. Each writer throws a renewed and problematic perspective on the colonial experience and resists generalising discourses against anything colonial. In the already complex mesh of cultures, languages, and

religions present in Malaysia these colonial memoirs may yet add another cultural component of a colonial past, as these children portray themselves among many other ethnic groups.<sup>3</sup>

### **I. Child Perspective as Mediation**

Because they participate in the re-writing of colonial history from the point of view of the British families who actually enacted the colonisation, colonial childhood memoirs are relevant to postcolonial perspectives. The children were the product of the visible political, military, and social English presence in the colonies.<sup>4</sup> We can thus consider the literary exercise of these colonial authors as the act of assembling an experiential history that can function as a means to re-narrativize the past, since the history of colonial children has sometimes been overlooked as they were on side of the invaders.<sup>5</sup> Thus, the authors who recreate their childhood are actually inscribing a revisionary perspective on the history of the British Empire. The result is a textual “politics of location,” defined as a specific context in which the text is produced and the self-narrator situated (Smith and Watson 45–46). In this critical context, I argue that these colonial authors, in deploying the childhood memoir, are also reasserting cultural agency for children of the Empire.

The memoirs I discuss are written by British citizens who were raised, and often also born in the colonies and who knew no other home but Rhodesia, Malaya, Kenya, or India. The experience of these children of the Empire may disrupt preconceived notions of the Empire; supposedly British, they have a lived experience far from the geographical and cultural experience of any other British child. This produces an in-between situation for these colonial children. Not aware of the negative political implications of their mere presence in the colonies, the child posits a new angle to the relationship of place and colonial subject. This perspective mediates their difficult and ambivalent positions as white British subjects. In these texts, the adult narrators take advantage of the imagining, creating, remembering, and retelling of “truths” from the child’s perspective to focus on the experience of personal and communal identity. Focusing on these early years, the author conveys a unique experience lived in a different dimension and measured through alternative standards, those

of emotional “truth,” rather than accuracy (Coe 1–2). Moreover, in this genre both the child’s point of view and the figure of the child become highly symbolic means of establishing the roots of one’s own identity.

Read as a whole, these texts project a specific image of a British colonial childhood. Through a “connected reading,” as proposed by Gillian Whitlock, I will examine common patterns of themes and narrative strategies that show how childhood memoirs mediate the contemporary perception of the role and presence of the British in those ex-colonies (Whitlock 203–04). Whitlock argues connected reading is a vital strategy to the process of creating cultural memory: “in the ruins of colonialism, the grounds of autobiography present the reader with room to manoeuvre, and different ways of sifting through the debris” (203). By “making links between and across various narratives, tropes, sites, figures, movements,” readers participate in a process of “supplementation rather than completion, for complexity rather than closure, for the making of truth rather than its revelation” (203–04). Rocío G. Davis argues in his study of Asian American childhood autobiographies that connected reading is especially apt for this genre, as it is a “plural and palimpsestic approach which privileges association as a creative reading strategy that configures a wider scope for the enactment of historicized subjectivity” (*Begin Here* 29).

The children’s rather idealized vision of the first years of their lives complicates the validity of a child’s perspective on what it meant to grow up as British children in the colonies. Their narrative is made up of common meaningful patterns, such as their deep connection with the land, their familiar experience with multiethnic servants, their connections with former imperialist travel writing as cultural translations, or, at times, their use of troublesome, sometimes racist, colonial discourse.

All of these common patterns are part of the mediation these texts may exert on a British sense of identity and history. Considering mediation<sup>6</sup> as one of the basic ingredients of autobiographical subjectivity—together with memory, agency, experience and identity, among others—I will explore the ways in which this mediation is exerted by these narratives. Mediation, though closely related to agency, may be taken to refer to a wider concept that includes not only the empowerment of these British

children growing up in the colonies who tell their past histories in their own terms, but also the kind of cultural influence and connections they make between the colonial past and their present sense of British identity. These narratives mediate specifically between the official history of the Empire and current understandings of the ideological implications and social consequences of that historical period. As adult narrators, they now look back to their personal experience as participants in the Empire at that time through a double migrating process: both collective, in that their family history is part of a massive migration movement of British families to the colonies, and personal, through depictions of their idyllic childhoods in Malaya and their often traumatic returns to England.

## II. Across the British Empire

Though we may think that most of the Empire's expansion took place mainly in the nineteenth century, it was also during the twentieth century that "expansion had sent the cartographers back to their maps to colour in yet more of the earth's surface in shades of pink" (Constantine 163). During the twentieth century the British Empire experienced both growth and its final decline. The British diaspora in the colonies produced generations of foreign-born British children who dwelt in an undefined place between the English and the native cultures; they were second-generation citizens who, though always considered English, had never known (or knew very little of) the mother country, and whose vital environment had only been colonial.<sup>7</sup> Many childhood colonial memoirs were published either in the last decades of the twentieth century or in the first years of the twenty-first century; and the experiences of migration and settlement recounted take place in the twentieth century, from the 1920s to the 1970s. The historical context in which these children lived was critical for the British Empire. Jane Samson explains,

The British Empire changed the way people saw and defined themselves. British colonies often contained groups of people who had never before shared a common political destiny; the British Empire also features mass migrations which introduced large numbers of immigrants into parts of the world where they

had never lived before. Countries like Canada or Malaysia acquired multicultural populations which contained everything from indigenous peoples to British or European immigrants and the descendants of immigrant workers from India, China, and elsewhere. (1)

This population movement involved a large number of British families who moved across the Empire, mostly in search of a higher economic and social position, and who looked for work as colonial officials and administrators, as in India or Malaysia, or who looked for land to become settlers, as many did in Rhodesia and Kenya. Stephen Constantine has explained, the empire became an integrated zone of easy labour mobility (178). The maintenance, even intensification, of imperial connections is suggested by the continuing flows of emigration from Britain.

British Malaya was not among the most popular destinations, though the British who lived there actually led peaceful lives, at least, until the Japanese invasion in 1942. The British in Malaya were usually colonial officials, administrators, teachers or workers in shipping or tin companies. The territories known as Malaya (which comprised the Malay peninsula and its adjacent islands, including Penang and Singapore) had been acquired by treaty during the nineteenth century, and most of them were ruled indirectly through indigenous sultanates; before the Second World War there was little sense of unity even though the group of mainland colonies was usually referred to as a single unit: “Malaya” (Samson 271–72).

Despite its actual diversity, in many childhood memoirs Malaya appears as a rather unified colony. Margaret Shennan’s *Missee* (1986), Geoffrey Barnes’ *Mostly Memories* (1996), and Blake Bromley’s *Opams and Bundu Beetles* (2000) are three examples of colonial childhood memoirs where the child perspective projects a special vision of Malaya. Shennan’s father worked for a shipping company, Barnes’ father was a company secretary of Dunlop Rubber Co., while Bromley’s father was a colonial civil servant schoolmaster. They all belonged to British middle class families and had long connections with this and other territories of the Empire in previous generations.

### III. Home and England

The authors soon make it clear that they considered Malaya, and not England, their only home. Shennan explains: “It is the personal story of one little English girl, born in Kuching, Sarawak, and brought up in Malaya, for whom ‘Home’ was a corner of a foreign field which never truly was, could not indefinitely remain, and certainly no longer is, England” (viii). The significantly titled chapter “Leaving Home for Home Leave” deals with the moment when young Margaret Shennan is taken to England to go to school. She even quotes Kipling’s verses on how children “learned from our wistful mothers / To call old England ‘home’” (126). She is not comfortable in “cold, damp and unspeakably grey” England (138), until she finds sympathy from one of the teachers who realises that “Margaret’s real home [is] in a far-off country” (149). In similar terms, when Bromley goes to England to attend school, this is his reaction: “Sailing home: if ever there was a misnomer it was this. Every Englishman ... thought of England as being home but for us this was a meaningless concept. Our imaginations could not project images of a country that we had never known” (Bromley 83). Moreover, Barnes, as he is also taken to England to attend school, describes it as “a rather depressing experience.” He says, his brother Ken and he had been “transferred from the open air life we had led in Malaya to the rather oppressive social and physical restrictions of sharing a house in South London. Our world seemed suddenly to have become smaller ... I was in strange surroundings with so much I did not understand, and because England was cold and dark” (22–23).

Shennan constantly tries to put her narrative into the frame of the historical times while she was in Malaya through the insertion of intertexts. She opens her memoir with several Christmas Messages from King George V and George VI to the Peoples of the British Empire (x), thus projecting an unquestioned view of a child who innocently believed her presence in Malaya needed no justification. They are part of the Empire specifically acknowledged by the King in the messages he sends to the children of the Empire: “It is to the young that the future belongs ... The King is speaking to YOU. I ask you to remember that in days to come you will be the citizens of a great Empire” (Shennan *Missee* 57).

Even King Edward VIII's short reign and his message of renunciation of the throne acknowledge the Empire and his journeys throughout its territories (58).

They also recount how their early lives were deeply marked by the enjoyment of days such as Empire Day and the unforgettable moments of the Coronation Day,<sup>8</sup> full of waving flags and generalised joy. However, the great importance of these historical events is soon counterbalanced by the little attention the young protagonists usually pay to them, as they find it similar to any birthday party: "Throughout the day of the Coronation Party I felt confused and by the middle of the afternoon I was distinctly irritable. I had ceased to care about the New King and Queen and the Two Lovely Princesses" (*Missee* 68). Again, this naïve vision of important historical moments reflects the relative importance they had for children, and the little importance it could have for the Malays and the rest of people in the colonies. In a parallel way, Barnes remembers little objects associated with the Coronation Day: "We were given various Coronation mementoes, mugs, handkerchiefs and medals with red, white and blue ribbons" (Barnes 16). These little objects and children's memories are often contrasted with extracts from history books, such as the ones inserted by Shennan from Robert Hussler's *British Rule in Malaya*, texts which provide the historical context. As such, the marked contrast emphasizes the child's limited vision of what went on around him or her.

One of Bromley's earliest memories also has to do with a visual text of the pink spaces in a map of the British Empire: "One of my abiding memories of the kindergarten was the huge Mercator's projection of the world on an inside wall, with the British Empire, shaded red or pink, occupying a great proportion of the whole. They believed in indoctrinating us at a very early age" (Bromley 33). The ironic comment may remind the reader of the contrast between the situation of the British Empire at the time and the political purpose of the map in the kindergarten classrooms with the imminent collapse of the British Empire.

Barnes explicitly acknowledges the ignorance in which the British community in Malaya lived of what was going on around them. The adult narrator realises the child's perception at the time: "Malacca in the

1930's was a tiny fragment of an empire which, I assumed, reflected the natural order of things. It never occurred to me to question the rightness of the Union Jack flying over the Stadthuys<sup>9</sup>; of Englishmen ... apparently being in charge of everything, having privileges and usually taking precedence over local people" (9). Barnes realises how Malaya of 1940 lived unaware of the war in Europe, and at the time "the deceptive myth of the British Empire's might had yet to be shattered" (43).

Shennan's memoir reaches its best moments when presenting the child's perspective on things she cannot understand. For example, when she tries to understand her father's job in the colonies, she does not get a satisfactory explanation. She learns that her father was "in shipping" and she finds it hard to understand the concept. The only reply she gets when she asks is "Little People mustn't ask things about Grown-ups" (19). It is easy to see a parallel between these children's non-understanding of their parents' situations with their not understanding the mere presence of British people in Malaysia. She considers her perspective as similar to that of a kaleidoscope; she actually begins her autobiography with the symbolic image of a kaleidoscope, a present she is given for her fifth birthday, a symbol of her "transient and disjointed memories of Malaya" (26).

#### IV. Colonial Childhoods

Because of these writers' position as white British subjects, our reading of these texts necessarily requires us to ask to what extent colonial childhood memoirs are merely stereotyped visions by colonial subjects supporting imperialist and orientalist views of the British Empire; or, on the other hand, to what extent their "lived experience" of these politically complex countries produce variations, or even challenges to, the discourses of imperialism. Richard N. Coe defines colonial childhood autobiographies as those by European children growing up in non-European surroundings, "childhoods whose narrative material is substantially coloured by the exotic," explaining that "the difficulty which faces the writer is that phenomena and experiences familiar to the child itself in the country or in the ethnic community where it grew up must be assumed to be totally unfamiliar to the reader" (*When the Grass* 225). Coe argues these examples of "exotic-didactic"<sup>10</sup> autobiographies posit a



model of subjectivity that obliterates the individual to focus on cultural concerns, specifically the need to describe the exotic setting to a Western audience. By presenting these primarily anthropological accounts, the writers are conscious of their role as cultural interpreters. The concern is therefore cultural and political rather than personal, and the lack of personal references suggests a collective rather than an individual voice.

For this group of childhood memoirs on British Malaya Coe's analysis is valid only to a certain extent. On the one hand, some of these autobiographers do engage themselves in lengthy explanations of the Malayan landscapes and people, in the fashion of colonial travel writing. They share some features of former colonial narratives by famous travellers in Malaya such as Isabella Bird, Emily Innes, Frank Swettenhan, or Katharine Sim, considered as "manners and custom" texts.<sup>11</sup> As Mohan Ambikaipaker argues, colonial narratives strive to provide a mimetic rendering of newly "discovered" people and culture. Responding to earlier travelogues and memoirs, these texts also form a tradition of writing where 'knowledge' about various colonial sites is built up" (34). According to this scholar, modern discourse of "race" in Malaysia has its roots in colonial literature, so, in many ways, colonial literature is "to blame" for its perpetuation of racial stereotypes and objectification. In the children's portrayal of the different races that worked as house servants (Chinese, Indian, Malay, etc.), we find a racist discourse that may help perpetuate the racial and social stereotypes attributed to the different ethnic groups in Malaya.

On the other hand, these memoirs cannot be considered as merely "exotic-didactic" for several reasons. These childhood accounts do differ from accounts of adult colonial experience primarily in the use of a child perspective. When compared to travel writing accounts by Katharine Sim or Emily Innes, we soon realise that these children's visions are neither patronising nor focused solely on explaining what the colonies were like at the time. Rather, the memoirists represent their childhood selves in order to find a place for themselves in those times. Thus, authors like Shennan and Bromley, while often explaining the Malayan culture and landscape, do privilege the personal over the collective voice, as their discourse focuses on their childhood vision of Malaya.

Shennan often distances herself from adults' common vision of Malaya: that "exotic world of sea and sun, coconut palms and casuarina trees, which my mother used to refer to as 'The Tropics' ... while most other people casually said 'The Far East' or 'The Orient'" (*Missee* 14). However, the adult narrator, through the child's viewpoint, reflects the way that adults referred to the place where she lives in Malaya in rather ironic terms: "The particular bit of The Tropics which we lived in had the very English-sounding name of Butterworth ... Butterworth stood inside a bigger box called 'Province Wellesley' and 'Province Wellesley' slotted into an even bigger box know as 'The Straits Settlements.' The biggest box of all was referred to by people as 'Malaya'" (*Missee* 14–15). She explains in detail what her child vision of the place was, as she "developed a curious perception of Butterworth-in-Malaya-in-the-tropics" (19).

Landscape is presented in emotional terms, showing what the place meant to the British children living there. Shennan describes the breathtaking landscapes she will always remember: "A shawl of ripe peach gossamer, enveloping land, sky and water. It was the richest, boldest, rosier, most compelling, breath-taking fragment in my childhood kaleidoscope. Dawn breaking over the Straits of Johore" (*Missee* 187). In a similar way, we get abundant descriptions of beautiful holiday resorts in places like Penang Island, Kedah Peak or Fraser Hill. Barnes also offers Eden-like descriptions of Malayan landscapes, a land he missed terribly while in England or Australia, and that he enjoyed in perfect bliss: "the hot sun beating down on the red laterite roads, dark green, deep shadowed jungle, the dappled bark and clustered leaves of rubber trees in their orderly plantations and the long hot sandy beaches on the coast where warm winds rattled the dry fronds of nipahy and coconut palms and whispered through the casuarinas" (59).

#### V. Declining Empire

The Second World War would soon interrupt these narratives of an idyllic time in Malaya; for these authors their childhoods came to a definite ending with the Japanese invasion in 1942. Again, Shennan uses political speeches by Winston Churchill, excerpts from news in *The Times*, etc., to provide a historical frame to her life during 1939 and 1940.

Specifically, she highlights the image projected in England of the extensive contribution of the Empire to the war: “The *Malayan Patriotic Fund* for war charities has reached a total of about 100,000 pounds, and all racial communities in that cosmopolitan country rallied spontaneously and immediately to the cause which the Empire has sponsored” *The Times* reports (*Missee* 156). These documents mark again a clear contrast with her own lived experience as a child, at times fearful of the changes the war might bring, at times absolutely oblivious of the dangers that threaten her idyllic life. Shennan provides a kaleidoscopic vision when inserting a document from the Japanese army, a “Confidential Pamphlet” about the Campaign Area in South Asia and the reasons why they had to fight. The point of view of the Japanese is an Asian one. They attempted to “rescue Asia from white aggression, the restoration of Asia to the Asian ... with the help of a powerful Japan, the peoples of Asia will work together for independence” (*Missee* 211). But this is just one text in the predominantly tragic account of leaving Malaya to survive.

Shennan recounts in detail how she lived the horrors of December 8th, 1941 and the Pearl Harbour bombing. On December 10th, 1941, it was still worse for them: the Japanese army attacked Malaya. When her mother breaks down, her words are a significant expression of the powerlessness the British felt in Malaya at that moment:

... Who’s going ... to ... stand ... guard? ... England used to ...  
be ... always has ... been a great sea power ... a great race of sail-  
ors ... Oh, and all those poor, poor men ... going to the bottom  
... Why can’t we stop them ... ? ... What I want to know ... is  
... oh dear, Bill ... whatever’s happening ... to ... our ... Em ...  
p ... p ... pire? (241 punctuation in the original)

Without making any explicit comment, the author is thus portraying her mother’s fear and surprise. The way Shennan chooses to phrase her mother’s feelings is expressive not only of the state of helplessness many British would feel at the time, but also of those adults who realise, all of a sudden, that the Empire was not as solid as it had seemed to them. Barnes further comments on the surprise many felt at the idea that the British Empire or the Royal Navy could be so deeply shaken: “In that

first disastrous week of the war in Malaya came the news of the sinking of *H.M.S. Prince of Wales* and *H.M.S. Repulse* by Japanese bombers off the East Coast. The effect was numbing. How could this have happened? The Royal Navy was meant to be a match for anyone” (60).

Bromley’s memories of the Japanese invasion when he was five are thus told:

I think it was on this same day of invasion that the last big motor race in Malaya was taking place in the pouring rain and the adults were listening to the radio commentary. I remember their discussing the madness of racing under these conditions and their horror as the commentator, with mounting excitement, began to report a serious accident in which two cars had gone off the road at great speed and one of the drivers had been killed. (25)

Again, the child’s perspective typically shows the horror of one death in the car race, and the reader cannot help associating this with the deaths of thousands after the Japanese invasion. Bromley’s memories are associated with the specific sights and smells that the Japanese invasion produced during December 1941: “The Japanese had started to bomb Singapore and, with our house on a hill, we could look across to the island. One night, we watched as huge fires of dense black smoke and orange flames engulfed the oil storage tanks which had been hit; and these continued to burn for days” (Bromley 25).

Barnes also recounts his memories of December 8th, 1941: “I came down the stairs to breakfast and I heard the voice of the news reader on the wireless, ‘groups of Japanese soldiers have landed on the beaches on the Kota Bahru area and are being mopped up ...’ Well, I thought, whatever it is about that sound alright. Serves them right; what were they up to anyway?” (59). He was nine years old at the time, and in different ways his vision portrays the ignorance and innocence many of the adults lived in. Some hours later he will learn about Pearl Harbour, the attacks on Hong Kong and the Philippines: “Life had suddenly assumed a dangerous new dimension ... Malaya had at last been caught up in what had become a world war” (59).

This lack of understanding of history is an integral part of the narrative perspective used in memoirs of childhood. This pattern is manifested in two ways. On the one hand, the story is filtered through a child's perspective that is oblivious of political and larger social considerations; as Penelope Lively asserts in her memoir, "For a child, the world of public events is an irrelevant background clamour. And even when the clamour becomes so insistent as to direct the pattern of daily life, it is still accepted on the whole" (47). In making these basic claims, authors choose a critical standpoint about the presence of the British in foreign territories. On the other hand, this naïve perception is contrasted with the adult's, which sometimes seeks to posit a more complete angle to the limited child's vision.

Despite the war, for the children, life still went on. Barnes is proud of the uniform with three stars on the sleeve he admired so much, as well as his disappointment when realising his father did not use it very often, wishing "my father was able to play a more glamorous part in the drama unfolding around us" (60). He goes on to reproduce the entries of his brother's diaries of December 1941, most of them dealing with going to the swimming club, Christmas puddings, reading adventure books, Mah Jong games, and the like (61–62). Meanwhile the Japanese were dangerously advancing and his family decided that they should go to Australia as refugees, so the adult narrator comments: "These ... entries were made during a period of disastrous events in Malaya and intense worry and upheaval for us as a family. We had little news of precisely what was happening and had so far heard nothing of our father" (65).

Shennan goes on portraying a child's perspective in the midst of terrible historic events:

The world, it seemed, was now divided between Goodies and Baddies without hope of reconciliation. The goodies were those people like ourselves, our close friends ... the R.A.F. personnel ... the Volunteer Forces ... All of these, all of us, were like David struggling against Goliath, who for his part had marshalled a seemingly invincible army of Baddies. In addition to the Japanese, who were the obvious enemy of Goliath's cunning right arm, we had to battle with the Colonial Administration

and the High Command of the Armed Forces and Churchill's supernumeraries, between whom, in Daddy's view, there was little to choose at this crucial time. (246)

It is also quite telling of their attachment to the place, that they do not leave their home in Butterworth until they are told to evacuate. At no point do they think of going back to England. When it is suggested that they go to Australia, they do so in the hope that they will soon be able to go back to Malaya (251). Margaret Shennan and her mother left for Australia in 1941 and were joined by her father only in 1945. Leaving Malaya is tantamount to leaving childhood. In turn, her childhood is a symbol of the colonial power in Malaya, where *misses* and *tuan kechils* grew up. As the adult narrator recounts towards the end, adopting the servants' English, "Misee Maggalet has never been back again to Malaya" (256). As transformed later in Malaysia, the place she knew as a child no longer existed.<sup>12</sup>

After three years of Japanese internment, in September 1945, her father is able to go to Sydney to join his family. What prevails in the memoir is the child's perception at the time and this is what is reproduced in the text: "I faced a strange, shrunken, wizened, snowy-haired, seven and a half stone relative, whom Mummy recognised as 'Bill,' but whom she called more often than not thereafter, 'Poor Old Bill.' And I knew for a fact that I no longer had a Daddy" (254). It is a traumatic ending for the author, who all of a sudden is painfully aware of how her whole idyllic childhood had come to a definite end, as well as the colonial enterprise in many territories all over the world after the Second World War.<sup>13</sup>

## VI. Colonialist Discourse

It is evident that these texts retain much ambiguous and problematic colonial discourse. On the one hand, their child perspective "protects" them at times from a patronising and imperialist view of colonized people and places. As Barnes states, "In our small lives there was little to cause us to question our role or presence" in the scheme of things (10). Imperialism was well beyond their understanding or caring. Since these autobiographers focus on their child selves, they primarily recreate those early years as idyllic. However, we also get justifications of the presence

and relevance of the British in Malaya. Shennan, overall, justifies the well intentioned thousands of Britons who, during the 1920s, sought opportunities in the distant territories of the Empire. Nevertheless, she also pictures them as people who had lost their ideals and thus the meaning of the whole enterprise: “Well-meaning, over-civilised men, in dark suits and black felt hats, with neatly rolled umbrellas crooked over the left forearm, were imposing their constipated view of life on Malaya and Nigeria, Mombasa and Mandalay. The one-time empire builders were reduced to the status of clerks, buried deeper and deeper under mounds of paper and red tape” (*Missee* vii).

In turn, these children can also be considered as unwilling participants in the colonial situation, as pawns of the whole imperial enterprise; primarily, in the sense that they were made to comply with racist and imperialist views of the natives in Malaya. Taking “Orientalism” as that Western vision of the Orient based on preordained representations, which typify subject cultures in order to classify and dominate them, it is clear to see how Shennan’s, Barnes’ and Bromley’s portraits of the natives share some of this orientalist vision, as they seem to be stereotyped and simplifying. However, in *Orientalism*, Said further explains that “Orientals were rarely seen or looked at; they were seen through, analyzed not as citizens, not even as people, but as problems to be solved or confined” (207), and this is what is missing in the child perception. Their naïve vision does not presume that the whole Orient can be seen panoptically, or that the Orient is stable and unchanging (Said 240), as they limit their narrative and perception to their immediate domestic reality and to what they could fathom from their families’ comments and attitudes.

Shennan chooses to portray her naïve perceptions of the servants, the only non-Europeans they had contact with, reflecting to a large extent the comments adults made about them at the time. Thus, through a child’s perspective we get a glimpse of the focus on racial features (“they all tended to look the same to me” [*Missee* 42]), and the depersonalised treatment the native servants usually received from the British masters. The Chinese used to be the cooks in the house: “Cookie was ageless. Over the years he was with us—and we never had another Cookie—he looked exactly the same. His food was delicious and he loved to please”

(*Missee* 42). This is a staple of the colonial perception of the natives: objectified, devoid of personal lives and personalities. “Cookie was my favourite. Mummy said he came from China with a wife, who had been one of my early babyhood amahs, but she had disappeared a long time ago, while Cookie stayed behind with us” (44). Other servants were the *syce* or chauffeur, a Malayan who smiles all the time and had time for her, and *Kebun*, a Tamil from Southern India.

In very similar terms, Barnes refers to the servants with their different functions around the house depending on their ethnic background: the Chinese Amah that took care of them but whose real name he never knew (3), the Chinese Cooky, the Malay boy, the Malay servant, Ahmad, also in charge of his father’s car, and the *Kebun* or Tamil gardener (Barnes 8). Again, he reflects also the racial stereotypes and depersonalised treatment they were given at the time, such as referring to the gardener as the “lean and rather mad looking Tamil” (8).

The more extended contact was with their Amahs: “Amahs were essential, and if they were inclined to pinch you occasionally, it was a bit of bad luck. Possibly some of them were simply clumsy. But you could always get another, and perhaps the next one would be better” (*Missee* 44). The utilitarian descriptions show the kind of racist and classist attitudes of the British at the time: “Amah was *yours*. Most amahs were patient and long-suffering souls. Their abiding characteristic was anonymity” (*Missee* 42). Another servant with no proper name was the “Boy”: “the domestic lynch-pin; who cleaned and tidied, fetched and carried, who served the meals, the kechi’ makans and the drinks, who kept an eye on the other servants, bringing them to Tuan or to Mem when they were required. In other words, the Butler and the Batman, the trusted Go-Between” (*Missee* 49). The depersonalising discourse used in these descriptions is very telling of the colonial mentality at the time. As such, the adult narrator is bringing forward the perceptions of the child protagonist at the time, and how the children reflected what was accepted around them.

For his part, Bromley chooses to describe the servants in more “exotic-didactic” terms, which similarly show the vision they had at the time of the natives:



There were four distinct nationalities with whom we came into contact. Making the usual broad generalisations, these were: Europeans, always in positions of relative authority; Chinese, like Amah, who were very industrious and adaptable and took on all sorts of roles as domestic servants, or as coolies or as peasants who often worked in the paddy fields and who were great vegetable gardeners when working in their own plots or in the case of the better educated ones, working in commerce or in the professions; Indians, mainly Tamils, working as shopkeepers and clerks and who provided the bulk of the labour force for the rubber plantations; and Malays who tended to live in the rural villages called kampongs, where they were more or less self sufficient. (22)

As such, Bromley puts special emphasis on the stereotypes concerning the Malays, as people of a “happy-to-go-lucky nature, which made them disinclined to do any more work than was absolutely necessary. The Malays would occasionally become moody and were known to run amok, and then this happened, they could knife people for imagined slights: but generally they were very cheerful” (Bromley 22). We witness again the simplification of the roles and ethnic characteristics of the different races in Malaya.

However, this racist view is contradicted at times by other descriptions which show that Europeans and British were one group among many others. At one point, Shennan describes the variety of people who lived in Malaya when she was a child:

Together everyone would hurry down the pier: local Malays, bearded Sikhs, Tamils and a few Gujeratis; Siamese, Sumatrans, Eurasians, pale-faced Europeans like ourselves; Straits-born Chinese, and what some people rather rudely called *pukka* Chinese, that is relatively newcomers from places like Hokkien and Canton. Some walked barefoot, others in sandals and slippers ... There were saris and sarongs, tutups and bajus, sundresses and cheongsams, pyjamas, trousers, shorts, singlets and loincloths ... All kinds of people ... the dirty, the scruffy and

the stained; the smelly, the pocked and the putrid; scrubbed, shining, starched, oiled, perfumed, elegant, beautiful, ordinary ... the laden and the light-handed, the bowed and the care-free, Venerable Oldies, Grown-ups and Little People like me: an amazing human pot-pourri. (*Missee* 94)

When contrasting this vision with her description of the servants, the ambiguous ideological underpinnings of these colonial childhood accounts is evident once more, making it difficult to decide whether these childhood memoirs are simply part of the colonial literature that stereotyped and projected an orientalist view of Asian colonies, or whether they, rather, deploy a hybrid discourse that actually interrogates assumptions about colonialism and is in search of illustrating more in depth the consequences of colonialism in the new postcolonial societies.

A colonialist discourse is further emphasised by Shennan's use of Kipling's lines as intertexts. From the famous "Take up the White Man's Burden" used in the Prologue, to the different chapter epigraphs, "To our dear dark foster-mothers, / To the heathen songs they sung / To the heathen speech we babbled / Ere we came to the white man's tongue" (39), or "You'll never plumb the Oriental mind, / And if you did, it isn't worth the toil" (49), Shennan seems to believe in the help of these lines as mediators between the British and the colonized people. These intertexts reinforce the imperialist view that occurs at times during her memoir. It is precisely when the child's point of view is abandoned that Shennan's discourse conveys a more colonialist attitude, mainly by not questioning the vision portrayed in those intertexts chosen as a frame to present her own life experiences in Malaya. Thus they become orientalist markers that contradict her child vision in other parts of her text.

Barnes uses the adult narrator to correct the imperialist vision and assumptions of the time, as the child was unable to do so. As a child, he did not question anything, such as "the feeling that we were all representatives of a ruling race backed by the power and prestige of the British Empire" (9). However, later "experience taught me that ignorance, arrogance, unkindness and bad manners could not have been absent from the circumscribed codes of behaviour in the Malaya of those days" (10).

He tries to counterbalance “the feeling of ubiquity and permanence of the Empire” with the acknowledging of “the unconscious propaganda and the conscious trappings of Empire which permeated life in British colonies” (10).

Different scholars have considered the importance of memoirs of colonial childhoods in very different terms. Vyvyen Brendon, for example, considers these childhood accounts in very positive historical terms and thus makes ample use of memoirs in her book on children of the Raj:

[T]hose who have spent time abroad are particularly prone to write retrospectively about their childhood; whether published or in manuscript, polished or artless, these memoirs form another valuable source of information. Of course, the writers may be selective in what they record and they are likely to be middle-class people. But I do not agree with the American historian who argued recently for the rejection of these ‘one-sided interpretations.’ (7)

In this last sentence, Brendon is referring to Elizabeth Buettner’s book *Empire Families*, where she argues that the British who report on their childhood in the colonies are part of the Raj nostalgia, and theirs are biased versions of Britain’s imperial past. As “one-sided interpretations,” Buettner argues, we should hope that they soon “become extinct along with the ‘tribe’ of the former colonizers” (269), thus giving little historical credit to their accounts.

Shennan’s own historical book on the presence of the British in Malaya is largely based on the British accounts and their recall of the idealised past, and it suffers from the same ideological ambiguity as her memoir. She explains that, in order to write an accurate vision of the British in Malaya, it is important to listen to the British expatriates who have “wanted to put their side of the story, express their opinions, reveal their experiences and, in many cases, correct misunderstanding and disparagement” (*Out in Midday Sun* 7). She is very conscious of the gap that cannot be easily bridged between the perception of those British who had spent their childhood in Malaya and the contemporary postcolonial view: “The enormous gulf between the political and cultural norms of

imperial Britain and those of the twenty-first century makes it difficult to view the record of colonial society objectively” (*Out in Midday Sun* 9). Shennan still hopes that the high ideals that led young British to Malaya “to promote the welfare of the people,” can still be used to understand their world” (9).

As other autobiographical practices, these childhood memoirs may thus interrogate national ideology based on the dualistic opposition of the good indigenous culture and the bad colonial exploiters (Lim 57). Shirley Geok-lin Lim argues, regarding Malayan women’s memoirs, that it could also be said that the recuperation of childhood memoirs may “re-historicise” national culture as “less clearly Asian in base, as mixed, ambiguous, discontinuous, disruptive, interrogative of the value of indigenous social institutions, and not easily assimilable to constructions of homogeneous cultural identities” (Lim 59).

“As time lends perspective to the European colonial record, British Malaysians are for the most part confident that their contribution will be seen as constructive and humane” (*Out in Midday Sun* 352). In an anti-colonial era, this may sound pretentious, but it nonetheless shows honesty regarding the feelings of many British people today. Within the critical framework of autobiography studies, these texts make a special contribution to the on-going debates about postcolonial cultural productions. Specifically, their recreation of colonial times may add to the on-going debate about whether “this panoply of colonial and anticolonial intrigue should be seen as a sign of nostalgia ... as a critical sigh of relief for the official end of the Empire, as a crisis of Western cultural confidence, or as representing ongoing tensions between East and West” (Lassner 2).

As Helen Buss explains, the memoir is “a discursive practice in which material realities and imaginary possibilities coexist ... it may concern itself as much with the life of a community as much as with that of an individual.” As such it “responds to the need of human beings to make a connection between their lives and their culture, especially as culture fails to represent their perceived identities” (Buss 2–3). The historical presence of numerous British children still needs to be accounted for, and it is precisely through a childhood memoir that these writers authenticate

their presence in the colonies and recount their historical experiences. Memoir tends to concentrate on a small but significant period of time, and thus “its concentration on scenes of trauma, initiation, and radical changes in consciousness are performed through the writing, which makes real what the larger culture may not as yet recognize. Set in vivid, scenic recreations of lived experience, the memoir wishes to register as history formerly untold” (Buss 23). In revisiting their childhoods, they do not appear to claim dominance but a share in British colonial history and literature, which needs to be reconsidered in nuanced critical terms not based on oppositions but on reflections on the complexity of these unstable geographical, historical, and cultural spaces.

#### Notes

- 1 Since the 1980s, I have been able to identify more than 20 childhood colonial memoirs. This article is part of a larger research project on colonial childhood memoirs across the former British colonies.
- 2 I have used the spellings of names and places in the source material which relate to the British period. The ‘Malays’ were of the Malay race, the original inhabitants, and the ‘Malayans’ were people who lived in Malaya, of Asian or European origin. Malaya was the name given by the British to the colony and it includes what is today Malaysia and Singapore.
- 3 “Malaysia is mainly characterized by three ethnic groups—the Malays (60 percent), the Chinese (Malaysia has the largest Chinese community in Southeast Asia—they make up 27 percent of the population) and the Indians (10 percent). The rest of the population comprises Eurasians and the indigenous tribes of Peninsular Malaysia, Sabah and Sarawak. Added to this bewildering mix are the many sub-ethnic categories contained within each racial group; this rich diversity is reflected through language or dialect variance, clan associations, caste, and religious disparities. For the immigrant races, differences also stem from the divergent places of origin in China and India” (Chin 5).
- 4 As Woodcock argues, “There are certain occupations and conditions of life that are favourable to the production of memoirs, such as the special conditions of colonizers’ lives ... Here we can see colonization through the eyes of working-class or lower-middle-class colonialists, living close to the earth and more concerned with survival and the welfare of their families than with any kind of glory” (1010).
- 5 Some of the few critical studies that deal with colonial childhood memoirs, or that use them as historical sources are: Hooton 1990, McCooey 1996, Whitlock 2000, Shennan 2000, Brendon 2005, Buettner 2005.

- 6 “Mediation” is frequently used to refer to political mediation, in international relations, or in intercultural communication, as a rather sociological aspect, or else as religious mediation of saints and sacred figures. Nonetheless, as the main theme of the 5th IABA Conference “Autobiography as Mediation” (Mainz 2006), the term now rather refers to the growing relevance autobiography has in cultural mediation. As such, I think it could be fruitfully applied to the kind of influence some colonial autobiographical writings may exert on the mutual understanding between the colonizers and the colonized. As James Olney, in his seminal article “Autobiography and the Cultural Moment,” argued, autobiography is “the story of a distinctive culture in individual characters and from within” (13), that is why it provides a privileged access to experience. Thus, when the autobiographers reflect on how the social context influences or limits them, they are immediately involved in a “compelling act of cultural criticism” (Barbour 44). In a similar line, Rocío Davis, in the resulting publication of the last MESEA conference “Life Writing and Histories” (Pamplona 2006), eloquently argued how autobiography can today be considered as “a privileged way to access personal and collective forms of subjectivity in changing cultural contexts” (Davis, Aurell, Delgado 11).
- 7 In this article, I am using the terms British and English interchangeably. I am aware of the problematic differentiation of these two terms; however, this is the way the authors themselves use these terms. These children’s nationality is British; however, the theoretical concept is Englishness and it is England the term they use in their own narratives to refer to the “motherland”. As Barnes explains in his memoir, they were usually referred to as “English (even if they were Scots, Welsh or Irish)” (9).
- 8 This refers to the coronation of King George VI and his consort, Queen Elizabeth, which took place in Westminster Abbey on May 12th, 1937. This coronation was quite unexpected as it happened after King Edward VIII had resigned after less than one year in the throne.
- 9 Stadthuys Building, constructed in 1650 as the residence of the Dutch Governor and his deputy, the structure reflects Dutch architecture and colonial legacy in Malacca. It is today the “Museum of History and Ethnography.”
- 10 Coe includes in this group authors such as Edgar Austin Mittelhozer (*A Swarthy Boy*, 1963) in British Guyana or Elspeth Huxley (*The Flame Trees of Thika*, 1959) in Kenya.
- 11 Some of these most famous travel writings are: *The Chersonese with the Gilding Off* by Emily Innes (1884), *The Golden Chersonese and the Way Thither* by Isabella Bird (1883), *British Malaya* by Frank Swettenhan (1948), and *Malayan Landscape* by Katharine Sim (1946).
- 12 This is a common strategy in other colonial childhoods that recount the experience of never coming back to the same place, as the country is given a new name after Independence. One example would be Peter Godwin in Mukiwa, who resolved never to come back to Rhodesia (Godwin 321), as it became Zimbabwe.

13 Barnes' father went through a similar ordeal in a Japanese concentration camp, and he tries, in the last chapter of his memoir, "Tom Barnes's internment by the Japanese, Singapore, 1942–1945," to reconstruct with the help of his own scarce memories, his father's, some family letters, and a few documents of the time, what his father's three years in prison camps held by the Japanese troops must have been like.

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