

Memsahib and Missus: Transcolonial Constructions of the White Mistress in India and Australia

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There is a striking similarity in the representation of historical white women in India and in Australia; on the one hand we find the 'memsahib' and on the other the 'missus', and both designated by their roles not only of wife and mother to white men, but also as mistress to native workers. In the case of the former, this designation as mistress is paramount, for in the nostalgic construction of the British Raj perhaps no one figure looms quite so large as the cherished *ayah*, nanny cum lady's maid. Individual childhood recollections of scores of Indian-born British were compressed and compelled into the one abiding memory, as Margaret MacMillan put it, of 'a much-loved *ayah*, usually a small, plump woman with gleaming, oiled hair, dressed in a white sari, who had sung to them, comforted them, and told them wonderful Indian stories'.¹ This paper is a rumination on the significance of this image of the Indian domestic worker in imagined women's relationships of (Anglophone) colonialism. Sparked by the recollections of my Australian-born great-grandmother reflecting on the life of her Anglo-Indian grandmother, Maggie Hobbes née Goldie (and in her case the term 'Anglo-Indian' is fittingly ambiguous), my discussion tentatively traces the constitution of an ideology of white colonial womanhood through the systems of circulation of cultural ideas and attitudes that emerged in Anglophone colonialism. In a transcolonial culture, the figure of the *ayah* was significant in a way that the very banality of the women's work she performed tends to obscure.

1. Margaret MacMillan, *Women of the Raj* (London: Thames & Hudson, 1988), p. 137.

By the late nineteenth century the Indian maid was recognised throughout the English-speaking world as a symbol of 'Britishness' with its attendant snobbery and colonial might. A telling 'joke' was published in an 1888 newspaper produced by and for the Native American students of Carlisle School in Pennsylvania, Massachusetts. This school, originally established to cater for prisoners-of-war in the western plains wars, had recently started up the so-called Outing System under which young American 'Indian' girls were placed in domestic service indentures. The gag runs so:

Must Be English.

Mrs Anglomaniac: I see you advertise to furnish servants of any nationality.

Employment agent: Yes, madam, no matter what. If we haven't 'em on hand we'll get 'em.

Mrs Anglomaniac: Very well. I see by the *Court Journal* that Queen Victoria is using Indian servants, and I want some nice, tidy squaws, right away.²

This offers an illustration of Tony Ballantyne's point in his study of Orientalism in the British Empire, notwithstanding the emphasis on the metropole: that we need to move away from both metropolitan-focused projects of imperial history and the tradition of colonial history that relies upon the nation-state as its analytical frame. Instead, scholars of imperial and colonial histories can 'foreground the relational quality of the imperial past', focusing on imperial networks and cultural exchange patterns to elucidate the integrative power of empire and the indigenising forces that worked to adapt introduced ideas to local imperatives.³ These 'overlapping webs' of relationships that Ballantyne observes enabling the circulation and adaptation of all sorts of cultural precepts of race can be seen dramatically in the parallels drawn with British India in the Australian press coverage of an aggressive new policy by the New South Wales Government to remove and place in service Aboriginal girls and young women in the 1920s. As historian John Maynard has pointed out, while contemporary Aboriginal activists organising politically against such

2. *The Red Man*, 8, No. 11 (October 1888), 6.

3. Tony Ballantyne, *Orientalism and Race: Aryanism in the British Empire* (Hampshire: Palgrave, 2002), pp. 2–3, 14–15.

efforts looked to the United States for models of black advancement, white Australians looked to the Raj to justify their presumption of racial superiority. Thus, as the NSW Aborigines Protection Board presented its 1925 report to Parliament, a newspaper reported:

It is the future of the half-caste race that presents a problem. The same difficulty is encountered in other countries under British rule. In India, despite every effort, the half-caste remains as an unassimilable section of the community.⁴

The mixed-descent person—especially if she was young and female—was the focus of much anxiety in the two British colonies and would in Australia be the especial target for state intervention. The British had first introduced the term itself in India, back in 1789, to designate the mixed-race children of European and Indian unions,⁵ and it was increasingly the preferred colonial term for mixed-descent people in both Australia and India, as Social Darwinism preached a racial hierarchy:

It has to be remembered that the Indian half-caste is for the most part a higher type than the Australian. Many of the half-caste women of Hindustan have exhibited talent of an advanced order to which they add a certain personal charm, which is not always noticeable in other half-caste races. In Australia, the half-castes are the product of an aboriginal mother, wholly untutored, and but little removed from barbaric races.⁶

At this time my great-grandmother Joan Kingsley-Strack had in her employ a young Aboriginal woman, Mary, who had been forcibly taken from her mother and supplied to Joan by the Protection Board some years earlier. Mary was for Joan, a mother of three young children, a source of emotional as well as practical support, but the photographs she took of Mary and treasured all her life reveal also the satisfaction Joan took in Mary's physical appearance, she being a

4. *The Newcastle Morning Herald*, 10 February 1926, quoted in John Maynard, 'Fred Maynard and the Awakening of Aboriginal Political Consciousness and Activism in Twentieth-Century Australia', PhD thesis (Aboriginal Studies), The University of Newcastle, 2003, pp. 192–3.

5. Penny Edwards, 'On Home Ground: Settling Land and Domesticating Difference in the "Non-Settler" Colonies of Burma and Cambodia', *Journal of Colonialism and Colonial History*, 4, No. 3 (2003), para. 5 (online journal, accessed 30 November 2006).

6. *The Newcastle Morning Herald*, 10 February 1926, quoted in Maynard, 'Fred Maynard', pp. 192–3.

small, plump, dark-skinned woman with gleaming black hair, neatly attired in a white cap and apron that set off her colour. By the time Joan came to record, on her deathbed in 1934, her memories of her grandmother Maggie Hobbes, Mary had long since left her employ and was living in poverty with children of her own. Nevertheless Joan maintained contact with her former maid, and the sentimentality with which she viewed her relationship with her ‘dear old Mary’ in her diaries was matched by those entries and other writings she made about her grandmother.

Maggie had migrated to the NSW colony on an assisted woman’s passage in the late 1850s as a seventeen-year-old from Renfrewshire, Scotland. Her trajectory from Anglo-Indian orphan migrant to Victoriana matriarch of a large pioneering family on the far south coast of NSW was, in her granddaughter’s account, almost imperceptibly structured upon the figure of her Indian nursemaid:

Gran was a very beautiful & proud Scotch girl (her father was Capt. Peter Goldie, Commodore of the Brit. East India Clipper fleet). She was born in India & sent at an early age back to Scotland with her Ayah. She had never ‘worked’ in her life, but did most exquisite embroidery & artistic work of all kinds ...⁷

In one of her various childhood recollections of her grandmother, Joan described Maggie bringing out ‘a carved Indian box’ that ‘had been given to her by her old Ayah for she was born in India many years ago’. Joan and two Aboriginal children (from the camp the Yuin people made near the grandparents’ property) spent a rainy day going through the treasures, while her grandmother’s Aboriginal maid—the ‘Queen’ and wife of the local elder—brought them ‘hot scones, Brownie, sweets and glasses of milk all round’.⁸

Joan’s romanticised memories of colonialism drew on a potent mythology of white settler womanhood current at that time. Described as ‘the legend of the goodfella missus’ by art historian Madeline McGuire, the ideal of the white settler woman as the maternalist guardian of Aboriginal people—who unquestioningly accepted and submitted to her kindly authority—emerged from the late nineteenth

7. Joan Kingsley-Strack to [Brian Penton], undated, c. 1934: Series 1 (11), Joan Kingsley-Strack Papers MS 9551, and National Library of Australia.

8. Joan Kingsley-Strack, ‘Nareen and Gooli’, unpublished manuscript: Series 6 (5), Joan Kingsley-Strack Papers MS 9551.

century.⁹ Yet this very Australian legend was a transcolonial cultural construction.

In Australia Mrs Aeneas Gunn held indisputable sway as the 'Little Missus' but her parallel in contemporary India was 'Chota Mem'. Within a few years of Jeannie Gunn publishing her two popular accounts of her experiences on an outback station, her cute child-servant, 'the little black princess' Bett-Bett, by her side, Chota Mem published her hints for housekeeping for new brides in India.¹⁰ Although the figure of the *chota mem* has been characterised as a foil to the classic *memsahib* stereotype, her featured 'pluckiness' and 'keenness' evoke the same admirable white-settler femininity holding up in an all-male frontier world as that represented by the 'the Australian girl' or Mrs Gunn herself.¹¹ On the subject of the native maid, Chota Mem told her readers in 1909:

[I] was always very glad my husband insisted that I should have one. The ayah is a most useful servant and if she is willing and clever will be a tremendous help to you, and you must own it is nice to have one woman in the house. It is such a comfort when you come in hot and tired ...¹²

Chota Mem's readers were those who might be heading from Britain to set up house. Paradoxically, however, the emergence of this filial and devoted servant was very much contingent on the desire of the colonial British living in India to establish their status both as rulers and as settlers, if not permanently in South-East Asia, at least somewhere in the British colonies. The *ayah* symbolised a kind of belonging predicated upon racial superiority. Certainly both Chota

9. Madeleine E McGuire, 'The Legend of the Good Fella Missus', *Aboriginal History*, 14, No. 2 (1990), 124–51.

10. Mrs Aeneas Gunn, *The Little Black Princess: A True Tale of Life in the Never-Never Land* (London: Alexander Moring, 1905); Mrs Aeneas Gunn, *We of the Never-Never* (London: Hutchinson, 1907); Chota Mem, *The English Bride in India: Hints on Indian Housekeeping* (Madras: Higginbotham, 1909).

11. Misao Dean, *A Different Point of View: Sara Jeanette Duncan* (Montreal: McGill-Queens Press, 1991), p. 71. For the plucky Australian squatter's daughter, see Richard Waterhouse, 'Australian Legends: Representations of the Bush, 1813–1913,' *Australian Historical Studies*, 31, No. 115 (2000), 201–21.

12. Quoted in Alison Blunt, 'Imperial Geographies of Home: British Domesticity in India 1886–1925', *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers*, 24, No. 4 (December 1999), 432.

Mem and Mrs Gunn spoke to white women who were mobile and transcolonial: pioneer women making new connections in strange lands.

Joan's wistful evocations of her grandmother's Indian childhood don't altogether accord with Maggie's own account, written in a letter to one of her daughters some decades earlier. Maggie asserted that when she was four months of age her mother had brought her from her Scottish birthplace to India, leaving behind an older brother and, rather incredibly, surviving a shipwreck and several days in a small boat at sea, to meet her father. Maggie's earliest memories, moreover, were of Singapore, where her mother's father was Harbour Master, and where by her account two younger sisters were born in quick succession. Around age four, Maggie was returned to her mother's family in Scotland and soon left orphaned, her father dying of cholera (en route to taking up a position as a surveyor for the Russian tsar's imperial fleet) and her mother of longstanding childbirth complications. As her mother's family were not 'kind', at the age of seventeen Maggie and her next youngest sister 'ran away' to the Australian colonies, where more maternal relatives lived. Finding work as a governess in Sydney, she met and married an English widower, and raised his children and another eight of her own on land on the far south coast of NSW selected by her husband and sons.

Though Maggie had been in India only briefly by her own account, potent mythologies of empire suffused Joan's depiction of her return to her ancestral home with a loving *ayah*. Maggie made no mention of her *ayah*, but it may well be that the story did in fact originate with her. Arriving in the Australian colonies in the late 1850s Maggie's position as a young, penniless and single woman was precarious. A few years earlier, in 1854, for instance, upper-class English emigrant Amy Henning described in her seaboard journal meeting a 'Mrs MacDonald', 'quite a lady', who had 'been in India a great part of her life' and knew various friends of the Hennings, thus cementing her equivalent status. She was going to Australia to meet her husband, who had had to give up his Indian appointment 'from bad health' and had been seeking his fortune in Australia for the past two years. However, as Henning's editor writes, 'the unfortunate' Mrs MacDonald had in fact been abandoned by her husband, and '[a]s a result of his rejection of her, on her arrival in Sydney she was reduced

to taking a position as a governess'.¹³ Mrs MacDonald's predicament is indicative of the dangers that awaited Maggie Hobbs, who, along with her younger sister, had listed her occupation as 'nursery governess' on her shipping papers. Single women emigrating on assisted passage to Australia in the 1850s, including numbers brought from the Scottish highlands to alleviate poverty there, were treated with discernible anxiety by the authorities and respectable society in general, who subjected them to rigorous moral scrutiny.¹⁴ Would-be governesses such as these two sisters dominated the female job seekers in Sydney between the 1850s and the 1870s, and could not easily resist the pressures to take on a wider range of more menial domestic duties.¹⁵ cautionary tales of scandal circulated widely in the Australian colonies advising them of the need for appropriate behaviour. Thus a tale published in 1852 of the downfall of 'two young orphan girls, little more than children, daughters of a respectable professional man, [who] came out from England' with the 'ostensible object [of] procure[ing] situations as nursery governesses' but with the real aim of finding marriage, 'soon began to show such levity of manner as to forfeit the protection of [their] kind patrons' and their downfall was 'predictable'.¹⁶ That the teller of this titbit was an ex-Indian Army officer may be a coincidence of no significance yet the fact highlights the fluidity of cultural transmission across colonial borders.

Maggie arrived in the wake of the Indian Mutiny of 1857, actually giving her birthplace in her shipping papers as Singapore (her sister, India, was possessed of an olive complexion and long dark hair), and

13. Joan Thomas (ed.), *The Sea Journals of Annie & Amy Henning* (Sydney: Halstead Press, 1984), pp. 82, 88, fn. 36.

14. Janice Gothard, "'Pity the Poor Immigrant": Assisted Single Female Migration to Colonial Australia', in *Poor Australian Immigrants in the Nineteenth Century. Visible Immigrants: Two*, ed. E Richards (Canberra: Australian National University, 1991), pp. 97–116.

15. Barry Higman, *Domestic Service in Australia* (Melbourne University Press, 2002), pp. 149, 150. See also Caroline M Heawood to Maria Rye, Women's Migration and Overseas Appointment Society, 25 March 1862, in *Uphill all the Way: A Documentary History of Women in Australia*, ed. K Daniels and M Murnane (St Lucia: University of Queensland Press, 1980), pp. 237–8.

16. Godfrey Charles Mundy, *Our Antipodes* (London: Richard Bentley, 1852; Canberra: Pandanus Books, 2006), pp. 180–1.

it may well be that it was a strategic ploy for herself as well as for her maternal relatives whom she initially stayed with on her arrival in NSW that she played up her position as a blue-blooded Scottish daughter of the Raj. Marrying the widower whose children she looked after as 'Sunday-school governess' and facing the hostility of her new sisters-in-law in the colony (themselves former servants from England), she may have considered it crucial in maintaining her newfound but fragile status as a colonial white wife to have had (a symbolic) devoted *ayah* return with her to Scotland. Considering the number of women migrants coming to Australia with similar fragments of colonial experience, we might hazard a guess that the class- and race-defining role served by the figure of the *ayah* was generally more prominent than actual experience warranted.

We might consider Maggie's story in alignment with what is known about female domestic service in India. Nupur Chaudhuri's 1994 study of white women's attitudes to Indian servants found that generations of memsahibs perpetuated a 'venomous cycle of anti-Indian feelings'.¹⁷ This hostility did not, however, manifest itself in a refusal to employ native women to tend the children. According to Mary Procida, throughout the Raj the *ayah* was typically the only female servant in a British home but her presence was ubiquitous, with even lower-class British women in India, the soldiers' wives, relying upon an *ayah* to assist them.¹⁸ It has been suggested that the term *ayah* was itself a derivative of *dyhe* (dhai), an early appellation for the Indian wet-nurse. So common was the practice of white women in India in the time of the East India Company to rely on Indian wet-nurses that a doctor railed against them in an extraordinary manner in advice he published in 1828 for young British mothers arriving in India. These nurses, he declared, 'are native women!'

Persons who generally eat opium, and smoke a dangerous narcotic, called *bhang*; who will promise to abide solely and wholly by the food given to them at their mistress's table, or to that which is prepared by the lady's

17. Nupur Chaudhuri, 'Memsahibs and Their Servants in Nineteenth-Century India', *Women's History Review*, 3, No. 4 (1994), 559.

18. Mary A Procida, 'Feeding the Imperial Appetite: Imperial Knowledge and Anglo-Indian Discourse', *Journal of Women's History*, 15, No. 2 (Summer 2003), 4, 15, fn. 43. There was also the *amah*, or nursery-maid, the wet-nurse and, occasionally, a cook's assistant or sweeper, responsible for waste removal. Presumably the single *ayah* usually combined these functions.

cook; but will obtain, by an insidious contrivance, garlic, ghee, etc, and partake of the most sour and acrid vegetables; all of which the poor little infant sucks to a certain degree in the milk. I have witnessed the most painful scenes of chicanery in the native nurses or *dyhes* in India. Their first object is to make money; their own comfort is paramount; and ingratitude is invariably expressed. I have known ladies to bestow on them repeated presents of clothes and money, to induce them to be kind to their infants, but without avail; kindness, in fact, seemed to induce, in many of them, impudence and threats, for the purpose of exaction. On one melancholy occasion, I was called out to see a lady's *dhye*, who was taken ill; indeed she was supposed to be dying of the cholera. When I arrived, I found the woman in a state of inebriation. She was nurse to a lovely infant, who was suddenly taken ill on the following morning, and died a few hours after ... It is also true, as mothers have repeatedly told me, that the *dhyes* have no milk; on one instance, it occurred in a fine healthy young woman. They have, in fact, the extraordinary power of *drawing back the suck*, and producing it at pleasure, a trick most probably practised in order to alarm and excite the anxiety of the parents, with a view to promoting their pecuniary objects ... Among other instances of the sophistry found in this class of natives, I have been informed that it is customary among them to give opium to infants to infants, when they are restless and troublesome at night. As the danger arising from the bad conduct of *dyes* is so great, I trust that ladies in India will see the necessity of nursing their own children ... There are, it is true, some instances in which nursing is not admissible; but in ordinary cases, where there is ever so little milk, I would rather give that little, than incur the danger arising from native nurses ...¹⁹

If *ayahs* were Hindu they were likely to be of the lowest, sweeper caste—presumably the only caste of Hindu woman who was prepared to taken on the polluting duties associated with childcare for the British. (In fact, she was likely to be married to the *mehtar* who disposed of the rubbish in the same household.)²⁰ Chaudhuri reports an historical preference for Christian *ayahs* when it came to the intimate work of childcare. Yet the British also considered such 'converts' untrustworthy; that they were descendants of the Portuguese and Indians and therefore Catholic compounded the distrust felt by the predominantly Protestant colonials.²¹ The

19. F Corby, *Management and Diseases of Infants, under the Influence of the Climate of India* ... (Calcutta, 1828), cited in *The Lancet*, 16 (1828), 760, and quoted in Valerie Fildes, *Wet Nursing: A History from Antiquity to the Present* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1988), pp. 204–5.

20. Blunt, 'Imperial Geographies', 429, 432.

21. Chaudhuri, 'Memsahibs and Their Servants', 552.

appearance of an etching showing an 'Ayah stealing a child'²² at this time—the 1820s—suggests a complex of fears about the dependence of white women on Indian child care, that may not have adequately represented the attitudes of the white mothers themselves.

Chaudhuri quotes a memsahib ten years on, writing when Maggie was one year old and recently arrived in India: 'If my child were to stay long in this country, it would be worthwhile to send for an English nurse, but as it is, I hope to bring her home before it becomes of any consequence and meanwhile I keep her as much as possible with me.'²³ British wives were expected to either leave their husbands or send their children away when the children came of an age to require education 'back home'. Thus we might register what would appear to be the decision of Maggie's mother to leave her young son in Scotland but bring her newborn daughter with her to India to join her husband, and again, her decision to go back when Maggie was about four or five years old in 1844. The discordant note here is Joan's insistence that she took the *ayah* with them.

I suspect that the *ayah* did not, in fact, return to Scotland but that this was an embellishment Maggie's granddaughter could not resist. As a signifier of her status as a cosseted British child the *ayah*, fictional or otherwise, served to refute any imputation that Maggie herself might have been a mixed-descent or 'destitute European' child taken in by her Scottish benefactors, a possibility that by the 1860s in Australia would certainly have occurred to those hostile to her. The Australian colonies offered both Maggie and her sister (the two young women had a bitter falling out soon after arriving in Sydney and never spoke again) the chance to reposition and even reinvent themselves. However, by the time Maggie was on her deathbed, her granddaughter penning what would be her obituary, the *ayah*'s function had shifted and her meaning had another significance to Maggie's granddaughter. No longer necessary evil, but status symbol for a beloved wife, Joan embraced the image of Maggie's *ayah* to construct her own identity.

22. *Confessions of an Oxonian*, c. 1825, etching reproduced in Swati Chattopadhyay, 'Blurring Boundaries: The Limits of "White Town" in Colonial Calcutta', *The Journal of Architectural Historians*, 59, No. 2 (June 2000), fig. 23.

23. Chaudhuri, 'Memsahibs and Their Servants', 552.

By this time, the 1930s, the figure of the Little Missus was entrenched in white Australian women's culture. Her contours were clearly discernible in Joan Strack's descriptions of her grandmother, who 'mothered nursed & cared for the Aboriginal men women & babes ... until they came to look upon her as their own "little Missus"'.²⁴ But this idea of the proper role of a white colonial woman had emerged hand in hand with the admonitions to white women in India to treat their female Indian servants especially with kindness.

Chota Mem among others had advised her readers to treat their servants generally with care because of their child-like qualities.²⁵ This shift in ideas about the proper, maternalist attitude of white women to natives was marked most clearly in the shift of attitude towards the Indian nursemaid that became more noticeable throughout the early twentieth century. For the *ayah*'s significance as a fellow female had become heightened in a way that was different from in earlier generations. Thus those custodians of correct female behaviour in India, Steel and Gardiner,²⁶ advised their readers to treat the *ayah* 'with consideration and respect', since she was 'the only woman-servant in the house'; a later writer, in the early 1920s, followed their lead in advising that the white woman in India should demonstrate she held her *ayah* 'equal' to the other servants 'whether she be a sweeper or not'.²⁷

As ideas about uplifting downtrodden Indian women and thereby the wider Indian culture infiltrated the domestic service relationship there was a complete reversal in attitudes to Indian wet-nursing. The doctor's paranoia of the 1820s had given way to the admonitions of Steel and Gardiner in 1907, who expressed their regret for the 'race prejudice' evident in the now 'universal horror of wet-nurses' in India. '[If] the Western woman is unable to fulfil her first duty to her child, let her thank Heaven for the gift of any one able to do that duty for her', they stated.²⁸ However, concern over the proper guardianship of

24. Joan Kingsley-Strack, diary entry 5 May 1934: Series 2 (6), Joan Kingsley-Strack Papers MS 9551.

25. Blunt, 'Imperial Geographies', 430.

26. See, for example, Flora Annie Steel and Grace Gardiner, *The Complete Indian Housekeeper and Cook* (Edinburgh: F Murray, 1890).

27. Blunt, 'Imperial Geographies', 432.

28. *Ibid.*, 433.

older British children in India continued, indeed it even strengthened, into the twentieth century, as the *ayah* was constructed as a less fortunate, more vulnerable woman, herself in need of motherly guidance.²⁹ Steel and Gardiner suggested that while an *ayah* should help care for infants young children were better cared for by an English nurse, whose superiority in 'upbringing and nice ways, knowledge, and trustworthiness' was assumed. 'The Indian ayah has many good points; she surrounds her charges with an atmosphere of love and devotion and has infinite patience', another writer conceded in 1923:

They make a charming picture—the fair-haired English child and the swarthy-faced ayah with her voluminous white draperies, tinkling silver bangles, and gay scarlet coat, as she sits soothing him with magnetic touch, crooning an old-world lullaby ...

But, she warned, 'children left to the care and companionship of native servants run a serious risk of acquiring bad habits, of becoming unmannerly, and of developing in undesirable ways'.³⁰

Alison Blunt has shown that, in fact, from the late nineteenth century British nannies and governesses were increasingly employed to care for these children. Concern about the negative effect upon the English in India manifested in a dislike also of the practice of engaging orphanage girls as nursemaids, whether of mixed descent or of 'pure English extraction', not on the grounds of race but because of their 'infectious' Eurasian accent.³¹ This sharpening of attitudes towards such hybrid women appears to have developed in tandem with the romanticising of the picturesque native *ayah*.

The published account of one Emma MacPherson, wife of a settler in the New England district in the 1850s, of 'a Lady's travels in the colonies' recalls some of those housekeeping advice manuals dispensed to young wives in the British Raj. Like other women of her time and circumstance she entrusted the care of her son as a baby to a native woman, but not without a long apologetic explanation. Reporting she had 'been told, that the native women make kind and careful nurses to European children', still she did not have the

29. *Ibid.*, 433–4.

30. *Ibid.*, 434.

31. The 1923 writer just quoted, Blunt, 'Imperial Geographies', 435.

confidence to trust them out of sight, and admitted only to occasionally 'get[ting] one of the young girls to carry [the baby] for me when I went out for a stroll, or to walk up and down the verandah with him awhile as I sat at work, and very glad I was of such assistance, for nursing in hot weather is a somewhat fatiguing business'. Of course, the girl had to first 'bathe in the river' and put on 'a frock' she kept for such occasions, before she 'allowed her to touch my wee one'.³²

This archly stated concern that native nursemaids be washed and dressed in special clothes before holding white babies and children recalls Ann Stoler's insights after observing the complex attitude of Dutch colonials in the East Indies.³³ In the Australian colonial and frontier experience there was as preference by white women for mixed-descent girls and women, who they could have sleeping in their houses and wearing regularly cleaned clothes, for such intimate work as child care, leaving more menial domestic jobs to 'camp' women who lived and slept separately. Bett-Bett, for instance, Mrs Gunn's child-servant, was the daughter of a white man and lived with her little Missus; Atlanta Bradshaw in central Australia in the late nineteenth century relied on the assistance of the mixed-descent daughter of a white man for the care of her children. When it came to the local Aboriginal women whom she used as 'house-girls' for washing and other heavy tasks, she insisted that they don specially made white uniforms that they had to leave at the house when they went back to their camp and 'slept with their beloved dogs'.³⁴ The noted early preference by British women in India for Christian *ayahs* might have arisen not only from the difficulties in hiring caste Indian women for such work. Such converts were hybrid in their racial background as well as their cultural background, with mixed-descent women from Portuguese Goa appearing to provide a supply of such

32. Mrs Alan MacPherson, *My Experiences in Australia. Being Recollections of a Visit to the Australian Colonies in 1856-7. By a Lady* (London: JF Hope, 1860), pp. 230-1. Both Mrs MacPherson and her husband were from Indian families; their son, also, would join the Indian Civil Service in the late nineteenth century.

33. Ann L Stoler, *Carnal Knowledge and Imperial Power: Race and the Intimate in Colonial Rule* (University of California Press, 2002).

34. Susanna De Vries, *Great Pioneer Women of the Outback* (Sydney: HarperCollins, 2005), pp. 119-20, 123.

servants. As such, like the two girls in the Australian examples, they may have had no families to claim their filial loyalties. The classic example, of course, is Anna de Souza, a Calcutta-born Goan Christian, *ayah* to the Governor's daughter Mary Frere in the 1860s. De Souza left us with one of the few voices of the *ayah* and showed that she was keenly aware that she had no family of her own.³⁵

In the colonial context those who worked as carers to children were almost always in some sense 'colonial hybrids' themselves, individuals who culturally and racially straddled the divide between coloniser and colonised, who may have been violently or drastically displaced from their native communities of origin, and who in many cases were vulnerable 'outsiders' in the colonial world. The comforting depictions of the *ayah* such as that summarised by McMillan, which offer a sense of belonging and connection to the coloniser, actually served to mask the precarious and even dangerously unstable hybridity of the native servant. Most powerfully, the *ayah* offered a way for colonial women (and, to a lesser extent, men) to imagine themselves safe and secure in a fixed race and class identity, in a world where such boundaries were inherently permeable and fluctuating. It was for this reason that such depictions became stronger rather than weaker as class and racial hierarchies became threatened.

Amongst Kingsley-Strack's photographs I turned up a creased and unidentified image of a small nineteenth-century white child with a sari-clad *ayah*. I have no idea who the child or the woman are, nor when the photograph was taken, but I can be sure that this anonymous image was treasured as a memento of colonialist nostalgia that helped Joan to identify and locate her own experience in a familial web of empire. Just as I suspect that in reality no *ayah* really did accompany young Maggie back to Scotland, I am sceptical of my great-grandmother's story about a carved Indian box of treasures, given to Maggie by her 'old Ayah' many years ago. Nevertheless as a metaphor for an imaginary idea of colonialism transported from colony to colony, it is certainly a powerful metaphor for the way cultural ideas were transported around the webs of Empire. The *ayah*

35. Leela Prasad, 'The Authorial Other in Folktale Collections in Colonial India: Tracing Narration and Its Dis/Continuities', *Cultural Dynamics*, 15, No. 1 (2003), 12, 18.

was a construct that, like the plethora of exotic items transported around the world by colonial travellers, helped to fashion a collective mythology of empire.³⁶ Inherently representing the dispossession of native people, in such travels the *ayah* fundamentally shaped our understandings of white womanhood in colonialism: she was indeed a transcolonial creation.

36. Maya Jasanoff, *Edge of Empire: Lives, Culture and Conquest in the East 1750–1850* (New York: Vintage, 2005).