

THE 6th INTERNATIONAL ANGLO-INDIAN REUNION 2004 –

A BLAST FROM THE PAST?

Gloria Moore and Patricia McGready

The Anglo-Indian Reunion held in Melbourne this year was a most successful and memorable event that was enjoyed immensely by those who attended. It was a splendid opportunity to renew family bonds and friendships and meet new and interesting people from the world over. It was a time when we demonstrated our unity and a strong commitment to our community as we celebrated our group identity with enthusiasm and confidence. However, there were some major concerns about the emergence, in several media releases, of disturbing and inaccurate views regarding Anglo- Indian identity and culture that need to be addressed. Three misleading media reports in as many weeks {The Age, 5.1.04, ABC Radio Australia, 9.1.04 www.asiapac@your.abc.net.au and SBS Radio World View 29.1.04, www.SBS.com.au} beg a response to set the record straight, a record built upon the collective experiences and lives of our unique cultural group.

The issue in question here is the reasons for the curious resurrection of outmoded, sexist and even racist stereotypes in these media releases. The views raised by a couple of the interviewees, self-appointed voices for the community, were based almost entirely on one print text and two films of questionable literary value. Everyone knows the pitfalls of using fiction to represent historical realities! One can hold any view privately in a free country and is a right we all share in, and we should be encouraged to continue to do so. It is only when attempts are made to air derogatory views in public by self-appointed spokespeople for an entire community, that the Anglo-Indian collective spirit needs to rise up to offer a more accurate and balanced view. There are as many opinions about Anglo-Indian identity as there are Anglo-Indians. This is not unusual. One could say this about

many minority groups and, indeed, New World societies for that matter.

While complex regional differences do exist within the community, to speak of a secret "inner life of signals and codes" {TheAge,5-1-2004} would not represent the views of the majority. Furthermore, for an Anglo-Indian to claim that many are "notoriously silent about their Indian heritage" is highly provocative and prejudicial. While tracing family history is a valuable activity, it must be remembered that our heritage goes back a long way into the past and is not always readily accessible. Our roots in India are as deep as they are wide. One would doubt that anyone would deny this historical reality.

In the ABC Radio Australia report, the impression given was that the Reunion was a chance for Anglo-Indians to build cultural pride. However, yet again, the same interviewees used the same text and films as being 'reliable' sources from which to draw evidence of Anglo-Indian life, "Anglo-Indian culture, Anglo-Indian themes." Yet when looked at closely, these texts reflect the worst aspects of colonial life and attitudes as they degrade the human spirit and the realities of our community. As Professor Lionel Lumb has said, it is well and truly time we moved on from Bhowani Junction! When one considers the wide range of historical writings and resource material available, one can only wonder about academics whose methodology can only lead to historical misinterpretations and dangerous fallacies.

A close look at our Anglo-Indian community in India, the US, Canada, the UK and even here in Melbourne, reveals several high achievers in almost every area of the workplace and in academic institutions. This is the reality. It is not intended to be merely a 'laudatory treatise' designed to 'stroke the ego.' While our past shapes us, we refuse to belong only to the past, as the media reports seem to suggest. We are a vibrant community actively participating in contemporary life. The new genre of Anglo-Indian writing that has been emerging, including the pioneering histories of Dr Gloria Moore {The Anglo-Indian Vision, The Lotus and the Rose, the Best of Both Worlds} and the first anthology of Anglo-Indian literature due later this year, should fill the chasms of what is missing from the collective body of knowledge concerning the social, cultural and political realities of our community.

There has been a growing recognition that Anglo-Indian women and men have

successfully created a bridge between two worlds. Unlike others before them, Anglo-Indians left behind institutions of great value. India was our purpose. From the very birth of our community, the source of our strength has come largely from within the household. Much needs to be done to acknowledge and honour the achievements of our women and our men.

As Anglo-Indians, we have been shaped by and have shaped two major cultures. Our collective historical experiences have even impacted upon the English language! Melvyn Bragg, in a new book, *The Adventure of English: The Biography of a Language*, speaks of the unique challenge England and the English language faced when they first encountered a country and a civilization greater than their own. He claims that the East India Company had to 'worm their way' into obtaining trading rights in India and had to 'butter-up' the Mughals in their own Persian tongue. India had no need of them at the time. However, their encounter eventually enabled numerous vernacular words and phrases to become embedded within the English language.

Turning back the clock is not what Anglo-Indians tend to do. Attempting to revive and reinforce old prejudices dishonours the community and in particular those who seek to perpetrate them. One needs to direct these thinkers along the paths of history, crammed and littered with evidence of what becomes of the human spirit and the lives of the innocent when no one speaks out in defence of justice and truth.

The final media report on SBS Radio29-1-2004, summed us up as being a group united by a "curious love for Masala chops, hockey and dancing the jive." While these are worthwhile activities, they still trivialize us and undermine the complexity and richness of our way of life. To refer to us as "Claytons Migrants" is a gross misrepresentation of who we are. Being Christian, speaking English and wearing Western dress as we have done from time immemorial is at the very heart of being Anglo-Indian. This has, in fact, been a source of our strength. To describe these attributes as being a "horrific anthropological definition of culture" disqualifies those people from being representatives of our community. They never could and never will speak for the majority, some of whom have helped create a renaissance of pride in our way of life. We do not need to apologies for being Anglo-Indian.

Australia has led the way in creating legislation designed specifically to promote social cohesion and understanding as distinct from ignorant scapegoating and stereotyping. To this end, the 1975 Racial Discrimination Act was a seminal piece of law making. What we need now within our community is free and open dialogue that promotes our way of life in all its aspects and helps us to belong comfortably in the 21st Century. We need to act with compassion towards all and protect ourselves from abuse, vilification and cultural misrepresentation.

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