



BOOK REVIEW: *Raj Days To Downunder: A Compelling Collection of Anglo-Indian Oral Histories*

Kathleen Cassity

McMenamin, Dorothy. *Raj Days to Downunder: Voices from Anglo India to New Zealand*. Christchurch, New Zealand: Dorothy McMenamin, 2010. 315 pp.

When it comes to publishing, we currently live in an age characterized by fierce cross-currents. Traditional publishing, both popular and academic, is dramatically contracting in the face of seismic technological shifts and economic pressures. Yet the same technological innovations that place pressure on the traditional gatekeepers of public thought have also spawned an explosion of self-published works, enabling the stories of less well-known groups such as the Anglo-Indians to circulate more widely than ever. Dorothy McMenamin's comprehensive collection of oral histories, *Raj Days to Downunder: Voices from Anglo India to New Zealand*, is one of the latest such endeavors, and a worthwhile one it is.

Many gatekeepers and guardians of "tradition," especially within the confines of academia, remain suspicious of self-published volumes (no self-published academic writer, for instance, could ever hope to gain tenure in an academic institution). Yet despite these naysayers, self-published texts continue to find an increasingly wide audience. The Anglo-Indian Community has particularly benefited from the development of self-publishing, since traditional venues have tended to represent Anglo-Indians in one of three ways: by stereotyping them, by disparaging them, or by ignoring them. For communities such as ours, self-publication (or, if one prefers, "independently produced literature") can serve an important purpose beyond the derogatory cliché of "vanity publishing": it can provide would-be writers and readers alike with an effective means of circulating stories regarding identities and

experiences that are insufficiently understood by the publishing gatekeepers. *Raj Days to Downunder* stands as an excellent example of how independently produced literature can give wider the audience for the stories of those who lack a significant public voice.

Produced with sturdy softback cover and in coffee-table size, *Raj Days to Downunder* provides twenty-nine stories, gathered between 1997 and 2008, of Anglo-Indians with New Zealand connections. This attractive and hefty volume gains credibility from professionally written forewords provided by Megan Hutching (Past President of the National Oral History Association of New Zealand) and Mervin Singham (Director of Ethnic Affairs in Wellington). These reviewers appropriately praise the volume as “add[ing] to our understanding of the social history of not only this country [New Zealand] but that of Colonial India and modern South Asia” (Hutching, qtd. in McMenemy 7), and “build[ing] human connections through the art of story telling” (Singham, qtd. in McMenemy 7). A well-written and thorough six-page introduction, including attractive black-and-white photographs, provides a helpful—and, considering its complexity, remarkably succinct—context in which to understand the Anglo-Indian oral histories, stories and photographs that follow.

McMenemy lucidly and sensitively elucidates both the colonial and postcolonial contexts that have continued to render the representation of Anglo-Indian lives problematic in most mainstream contexts. Explaining why she undertook this project, McMenemy states that when studying “academic accounts of life in British India,” she “found no resonances with the fond memories I held about my own life” (13). In colonial contexts, McMenemy states, Anglo-Indians were typically “depicted as a downtrodden community, both by British and Indian historians” (13), who also “perpetuated the misconceived assumption that Anglo Indians were a homogeneous community, which they certainly are not” (13). When McMenemy mentioned this disjuncture to Indian historians at the University of Canterbury, she was instructed to “obtain the evidence” to back up her assertions (13), and thus her research began.

While representations of Anglo-Indians had always been proven problematic in the colonial era, McMenemy notes, the postcolonial era presents yet another constellation of challenges when it comes to Anglo-Indian representation.

McMenamin concedes that critiques of colonial rule are valid, but points out that postcolonial critiques have often “overlooked the significance of what can be gained by closer scrutiny of the overlapping cultures of east and west, and how these operated in what was one of the early and extremely diverse plural societies of the twentieth century” (9). That “closer scrutiny” is just what McMenamin undertakes here, through the twenty-nine transcribed interviews that she has rendered into a tapestry of contrasting yet compelling illustrated stories of Anglo-Indians whose connections are in New Zealand, and whose roots and memories in India.

Raj Days to Downunder, while too hefty for most readers to absorb in a single sitting, is clearly organized into manageable sections and is the kind of volume that invites the reader to dip in periodically, absorbing a few stories at a time. The book is divided into three sections based on Indian geography—Calcutta and Bengal Stories, Northwest Region Stories, and Burma, South India and Bombay Stories. The sections are generally well balanced, with ten stories in Part I, eleven in Part II, and nine in Part III (subdivided into three per area). Each entry is organized by topic, with appropriate sub-headers provided (such as “Family,” “Language,” “Religion,” “Servants,” “Social Life,” and so forth) that allow for easy cross-referencing between accounts. Not every sub-header appears in every story, however; McMenamin allows her subjects to tell their own stories such that the subjects themselves determine the themes that emerge from their accounts. Well-chosen photographs, meanwhile, make McMenamin’s point regarding diversity within the Anglo-Indian Community more effectively than mere prose ever could: As readers, we see for ourselves the wide range of physical appearance, dress, occupation, and leisure activities that the stories elucidate.

Taken together, the Anglo-Indian oral histories and photographs leave the reader feeling as though he or she has lived through a particular experience of India as well as an experience of New Zealand; the voices, while not uniform, are uniformly compelling. Readers (both Anglo-Indian and not) will discover some world views with which they agree, as well as some with which they disagree; when discussing issues as thorny as India’s colonial past and the multifaceted subject-position of those whose own genetic and cultural heritage is mixed, this kind of multifarious presentation and complex reader response is to be expected. Moreover, the diversity

embedded within the stories McMenemy's overarching point: Anglo-Indians are not a homogenous community. Indeed, the reality, complexity, and entanglement of Anglo-Indian experiences and identities are far more fascinating (even when maddening) than any two-dimensional, stereotypical caricature could ever be.

Raj Days Downunder is an important addition to the library of anyone with an Anglo-Indian heritage or an interest in Anglo-Indian matters, providing a necessary corrective to mainstream accounts that tend to fluctuate between disparagement and neglect. Anglo-Indians of the diaspora, wherever they may be—whether “down under” in New Zealand or Australia, in North America or Europe, still in India, or anywhere else—will certainly find it a satisfying volume to keep nearby. But beyond our own community, there is much here to appeal to anyone with an interest in colonial history, postcolonial diaspora, life writing, or oral/family history and genealogy more generally. Each day we are somehow reminded that the world as we know it (or once knew it) is fading away—a prominent celebrity dies, a longstanding community institution vanishes, something new emerges that we feel ill prepared to understand. As we become increasingly aware of the perpetual loss and change that accompanies living, we also become mindful of the need to preserve voices, memories, and stories from our elders that, without interventions such as McMenemy's project, are likely to fall into oblivion. There are still so many voices that the gatekeepers of traditional publishing continue to neglect. For all the potential downside of current technology, for all that we fear might be threatened by technological and economic change, it is also fortuitous for the Anglo-Indians—as well as anyone interested in preserving the memories and stories of those who are not already famous—that these changes have at the same time made it possible for oral historians such as McMenemy to maneuver around the gatekeepers and independently publish a work such as *Raj Days to Downunder*. Accordingly, this book deserves a wide audience.

Copies of *Raj Days to Downunder* may be obtained by contacting the author at dorothysbookshop@gmail.com.

Kathleen Cassity is an Associate Professor of English at Hawaii Pacific University in Honolulu, Hawaii USA, and holds a PhD in English from the University of Hawaii at

Manoa. An earlier version of this paper was orally presented in June 2010 at the Biennial Conference of the International Auto/Biography Association held at University of Sussex in Brighton, UK.

*Born and raised in Seattle, Washington USA, she is the daughter of an Anglo-Indian immigrant from Chennai. She has been researching the Anglo-Indians since 1994 when she wrote her prizewinning honors thesis, "Voices from the Shadows: Locating the Anglo-Indian Subject in Postcolonial Texts." She has published articles for IJAIS regarding the novel *Bhowani Junction* and the film *36 Chowringhee Lane*, has presented a paper at the East-West Center's South Asia Symposium, and has published fiction, creative nonfiction and poetry regarding the Anglo-Indian experience. Her essay "Distances" appeared in CTR Publications' anthology *The Way We Are*. Her short story "Butterfly" won first place and publication in the anthology *Voices from the Verandah*, where she also published two poems, "Chee Chee" and "Diaspora." Cassity is currently conducting research in the field of Anglo-Indian life writing and is working on a novel based on the Anglo-Indian diasporic experience. She can be contacted at kcassity@hpu.edu.*