

Chapter 14
Empire Made Me

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b. 1969

I live and work in Leicester, a city in the English Midlands that is well known for its cultural diversity, and a place where the aftermath of Empire and Britain's multi-directional imperial connections are ever-present in our daily lives. Leicester could not be more different from the small, East Anglian village where I grew up in the 1970s and 1980s, or from the Scottish capital city, Edinburgh, where I attended University in the 1990s. My large, extended farming family has no personal connection with Empire, as far as we know, and Empire did not feature explicitly in my life as a child, teenager or student in my early twenties. However, despite or perhaps because of this I became an historian of the Indian Ocean world. This chapter will work through the personal and political forces that first drew me to its study, and that continue to shape my intellectual engagement with history, colonialism and postcolonialism.

I was born in 1969, and grew up on a farm in the village of Houghton, which lies on the River Ouse in Cambridgeshire, a county in the east of England, near the small town of St Ives. Houghton is extremely picturesque; there is a Norman church, numerous thatched cottages, and a clock tower in the village centre. It is mentioned in the Domesday Book, and surrounding fields bear the marks of ridge and furrow farming. During my childhood, village life was punctuated with the seasonal rhythms

of harvesting, Maypole dancing, cricket, well-dressing,¹ feast week and remembrance Sunday. A statue of the locally famous nonconformist Potto Brown (1797-1871) stands in the village square, in honour of his philanthropy in founding the village chapel and two local schools.

Empire did not feature explicitly in my life as a child. My father was too young to fight in World War II, though he served his national service as a doctor's assistant in the Royal Navy on the Isle of Wight afterwards. His older brother had seen wartime service, travelling the world in the Navy, though he never talked about it. My mother was born after the War, her father having served in the Home Guard. Nobody, as far as we are aware, undertook any kind of East India Company or colonial service, or migrated to the settler colonies. However, as an adult I have come to realize that Empire had been a presence in my early life, but that it was never discussed as such. I remain uncertain as to whether this was the result of ignorance about Empire in this small, rural place; or whether it was because of the difficulties of finding a vocabulary to talk about the discomfort of the loss of imperial dominions and possibly the erosion of national distinction or pride, in the aftermath of the war. Ann Laura Stoler has usefully described the inability to find the right words to speak of Empire as 'colonial aphasia'.²

Why in the absence of family or personal connections, or discussions of colonization or decolonization, do I say that Empire made me? It is because although it was never made explicit, I did encounter what we might loosely term 'the imperial' in several areas of my life. I mentioned earlier that a statue of local hero Potto Brown, born at the turn of the nineteenth century, takes pride of place in the centre of my

¹ A summer custom of parts of rural England, where water wells are decorated with flowers.

² Ann Laura Stoler, 'Colonial Aphasia: Race and Disabled Histories in France', *Public Culture*, vol. 23, no. 1 (2011): 121-56.

home village. It was put up shortly after his death, at the end of the nineteenth century. At school, by the age of ten we had studied his life and work, and celebrated his philanthropy in education and the Church. What we did not learn then, and what I discovered only recently, is that Potto Brown was a nonconformist Quaker, and was so active in anti-slavery agitation in the 1830s that his home became the movement's local headquarters. He hosted John Scoble, the secretary of the Anti-Slavery Society, and met the American anti-slavery and peace activist Elihu Burritt, who had been appointed American Consul in Birmingham (England) by President Abraham Lincoln, and later described his trip to Houghton.³ His son later wrote: 'The St. Ives people were great supporters of the movement, and it was said that any lecturer speaking on any subject at a meeting could always elicit cheers from his audience if he referred to the abolition of slavery.'⁴ This might not appear worthy of note to scholars of metropolitan, radical, activist political circles, but it seems to me enormously important in suggesting just how connected one small East Anglian village was to global political concerns and debates in the aftermath of the abolition of slavery in the British Empire.

There were other imperial, and global, connections too. Like everybody we knew in the 1970s, my family was fiercely patriotic. Our village celebrated the Queen's Silver Jubilee of 1977 with enormous gusto. In my Brownie uniform, I sat on the back of a tractor and trailer (driven by my granddad), with my pack, in a circle,

³ *Potto Brown, the village philanthropist* (St Ives, Hunts: Albert Goodman, 1878), 118, 161-3; *A Jubilee Memorial of the Union Chapel, Houghton, Huntingdon, prepared at the request of the church by the pastor, Henry Bell* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1890), 14-15; *Reminiscences of Bateman Brown, J.P.* (Peterborough: The "Peterborough Advertiser" Company Ltd, 1905), 126. I thank Gerry Feakes for lending me copies of these rare books. Claire Midgley discusses anti-slavery in St Ives in *Women Against Slavery: The British Campaigns 1780-1870* (London: Routledge, 1992).

⁴ *Reminiscences of Bateman Brown*, 126.

arms straightened above our heads and hands clasped together. We were candles on a celebratory cake. (I was fiercely jealous of Sunday School, which did Noah's Ark, and was much more interesting, I thought.) This brings me to my next point: Girl Guiding. It is well established that Sir Robert Baden-Powell's Scout movement, which began in the first decade of the twentieth century, informed by Sir Robert's army experiences in India and Africa, promoted character, fitness, patriotism and loyalty to Empire, initially amongst boys and, within a year or so and through Agnes and Olive Baden-Powell, girls.⁵ The Brownies and Girl Guides were an important part of my growing up, and what I now know to have been my socialization as a young woman. We learned how to sew, cook and camp. We unquestioningly obeyed particular hierarchies, and pledged our loyalty to God and the Queen. And – I remember this distinctly – we studied the Commonwealth. I massively enjoyed working towards my Commonwealth badge, for which I chose to study the Caribbean island of Antigua. To be sure, this did not necessitate any kind of understanding of the Atlantic Triangle or enslavement, but rather was underpinned by a celebration of the emergence of the Commonwealth of Nations. Britain, of course, lay at its heart. We were, it seemed to me at that time, one large and fundamentally equal family.

Some of the highlights of my childhood and early teenage years were repeat coach trips to the Commonwealth Institute in London. The Institute was located on Kensington High Street in London, about seventy miles from where I lived. Though I was not aware of it then, it was the legacy of the Imperial Institute, which had been established in 1887 following the Colonial and Indian Exhibition, held in London during the previous year. The Commonwealth Institute opened in 1962, funded by the

⁵ Michael Rosenthal, 'Knights and Retainers: The Earliest Version of Baden-Powell's Boy Scout Scheme', *Journal of Contemporary History*, vol. 15, no. 4 (1980): 603-17; Michael Rosenthal, *The Character Factory: Baden-Powell and the Origins of the Boy Scout Movement* (London: Pantheon Books, 1986).

Foreign and Commonwealth Office.⁶ I have thought long and hard about why I so enjoyed these trips, and I have dug deep to remember them. Memory of course is a tricky thing, and I am loathe to make any attempt to describe how I think the displays were mounted, or what I think I felt or experienced there, for fear of being contradicted by historic guidebooks, catalogues or photographs. However, I am confident in saying that for a child growing up in a small, mono-cultural village, the Institute represented the geographical expansiveness and richness of other places and cultures, and the seemingly limitless possibilities of travel and study. My story of visiting the Commonwealth Institute is not, I am sad to say, a story of any kind of personal awakening to post-imperial politics and power. Rather, it is a tale of what I experienced as the chance to escape from life in a small, English country village, albeit imaginatively. Indeed, the nuances of Argentinean claims to the Falkland Islands (Malvinas) escaped me when war broke out in 1982; and I had no understanding of the historic connections between Britain and India when Prime Minister Indira Gandhi was assassinated two years later, though I distinctly remember the event.

I often tell this story: I applied to Edinburgh University because the careers tutor at my comprehensive school told me that it was unlikely I would achieve the grades necessary to win a place at such a prestigious institution. But I did, and so it was to the capital of Scotland that I headed in autumn 1989: the first person in my large, extended family to read for a degree. Margaret Thatcher was still Conservative prime minister (at least for a few months more), though the Labour Party would not win an election for almost a decade. 1989 was otherwise a politically memorable year,

⁶ The Institute closed in 2002 when some of its collections were donated to Bristol's British Empire and Commonwealth Museum. The Museum has since closed, and the collections were deposited with Bristol Museums, Galleries and Archives.

in Britain if not overseas. A deeply unpopular community charge (poll tax) had been rolled out across Scotland in 1989, the Berlin Wall fell in November, and student grants had been frozen and replaced with loans.

My first year university flat was on Antigua Street (number 12, above a fish and chip shop), which struck me at the time as a curious coincidence from my days as a Girl Guide. I noticed a further Commonwealth presence on the streets of Edinburgh's Georgian New Town, as Jamaica Street for instance split in two lanes and fed into India Street. Strange as this may sound to twenty-first century readers familiar with the history of the British Empire, it was some time before I came to appreciate how important Empire, imperial trade, enslavement and sugar plantations had been to the development of the city's wealth and prosperity. These issues were not openly acknowledged at the time.⁷ This realization dawned as I met and worked with two extraordinary scholars who have had a huge impact on the development of my work and career. First was Ian Duffield, who had joined his political activism with his research through his work in Africa and on pan-Africanism, and later on the black presence in early colonial Australia. Second was Crispin Bates, then a young man fresh out of Cambridge, excited by the intellectual possibilities of engagement with history, Subaltern Studies and postcolonial theory.

It is difficult to over-emphasize just how important Ian and Crispin were (and remain) in and to my personal and scholarly life. They opened my eyes to the ongoing economic, social and cultural relevance of a history that I had not learned in school. As we journeyed together across colonies and continents, beginning with undergraduate study of imperialism in 1990, and extending eventually into the

⁷ In the larger British context, now explored in Catherine Hall, Nicholas Draper, Keith McClelland, Kate Donington and Rachel Lang, *Legacies of British Slave-ownership: Colonial Slavery and the Formation of Victorian Britain* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014).

completion of my doctoral research in 1997, a history of global power and exploitation unfolded, leaving me with a set of uncomfortable questions about the history and legacies of Empire for the geo-politics of the late twentieth century. I chose the Indian Ocean island of Mauritius as the focus of a PhD project that I initially envisaged as a history of crime and punishment in a colony entirely populated through migration, including African and Indian slaves and Asian indentured labourers. I had specialized in Australian penal colonies and social theories of punishment during the final (fourth) year of my History/ Sociology degree programme, and under the tutorage of eminent penologist David Garland (another massive influence on my work) I had become interested in the many absences of Empire within the development of social theories of punishment. During my first term of postgraduate registration, I ventured to the Public Records Office in Kew (now renamed The National Archives) and was astonished to find Colonial Office papers indicating that Mauritius had been the site of a penal settlement for convicts from India. This became the focus of my research, and I spent the next three years piecing together a social, cultural and economic history of the penal settlement during the period 1815-53, using Colonial Office papers as well as India Office records, and the Mauritius Archives.⁸ The necessary use of records from across multiple archives in writing histories of forced mobility and migration has been a defining feature of my subsequent work.

I submitted my PhD for examination at the end of August 1997, and moved to Leicester the following day (waking up in my new flat to news of Princess Diana's death). I took up what was initially a temporary lectureship in the Department of

⁸ The India Office was then based at Blackfriars, and is now incorporated into the Asia, Pacific and Africa Collections of the British Library. The Mauritius Archives are in Coromandel, just south of the capital Port Louis.

Economic and Social History.⁹ I was rather overwhelmed to be the replacement for the eminent scholar of South Asia, Clive Dewey, who had gone overseas as a research fellow. Leicester could not have been more different to Edinburgh. If poverty in the latter had largely been hidden away from central view in suburban housing ‘schemes,’ Leicester’s was concentrated in some of the tightly packed, city centre, red-bricked terraces that are so typical of the English Midlands. Leicester also brought me for the first time into everyday contact with what Jordanna Bailkin has called the afterlife of Empire.¹⁰ In a city rightly celebrated for its tolerance and diversity, it was impossible to ignore the significance of post-colonial migration and displacement – including of people from the Caribbean (especially the small islands), South Asia and East Africa – and their enormously creative social and cultural impacts.¹¹ Famously, a few years later the 2011 census revealed that Leicester is one of three British cities outside London where although they are the largest single group, white Britons are in a minority overall.¹²

I would like to pause here to stress the profound impact that higher education has had on my personal life, and how university and my personal background have shaped my research career. Edinburgh University took me out of a village setting and into city life. It brought me into contact with people from hugely privileged social

⁹ The department no longer exists; it merged with the Department of History in 2003.

¹⁰ Jordanna Bailkin, *The Afterlife of Empire* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012).

¹¹ Andrew Brown, *The Guardian* [London (UK)] 2 January 2010: 25. Saturday: Here, everyone is a minority: Leicester will soon become the first British city with a non-white majority – a transformation which is welcomed by its citizens; Esther Addley, *The Guardian* [London (UK)] 1 January 2001: 2.6. Real lives: Side by side: In the 70s, Leicester council did everything it could to keep out thousands of Asians fleeing Uganda. But they came anyway – and it will soon be the first British city with a white minority; Judith Vidal-Hall, ‘Leicester: City of migration,’ *Index on Censorship*, 32:2 (2003): 132-141.

¹² Alice Philipson, *The Telegraph* [London (UK)] 10 January 2013: White Britons a minority in Leicester, Luton and Slough; *The Economist* [London (UK)] 8 February 2014: Into the Melting Pot.

backgrounds, many connected to wealthy and/or intellectual metropolitan circles, which were very different to my own. It opened my eyes also to some of the complexities of social injustice, which had not been discussed in my family when I was growing up. These included the unraveling of apartheid in South Africa and, closer to home, Section 28 (which in 1988 banned the ‘promotion’ of homosexuality in schools) and Scottish claims to Independence within the context of a seeming denial of the nation’s implication in Britain’s imperial expansion. Initially, though, I was most interested in the social dynamics of gender, because they seemed to have most resonance for my own life. I undertook voracious reading and study of a range of feminist history and theory, and I have since spent time trying to figure out how gendered experience (including of sexuality) triangulates historically with that of ‘class’ and ‘race’. I was and remain keenly aware of their personal and political dynamics; and I know that the working through of the historical significance of gender, class and race in many ways represents my efforts to make sense of the formation of my own (now) distinctly bourgeois life, as a white, professional woman and a migrant to (and near twenty-year resident of) a post-colonial English city, where I am a member of what is sometimes called an ‘ethnic minority’.

How has this interplay between the personal and the political related to the development of my specific research interests? They might be summarized as an attempt to bring the peripheries of Empire into its centre, and to place ordinary people at the heart of historical process and change. My postdoctoral research was initially dedicated to exploring Indian convict transportation to sites in the eastern Indian Ocean, including to penal settlements along the littorals of South East Asia and the Andaman Islands in the Bay of Bengal. I began to explore the connections between Asian, metropolitan and imperial convict flows, and my work expanded to include

research on transportation from and between the Caribbean, Cape, Mascarene Islands, India and Australia. I also started to see how penal settlements were linked with enslavement and Indian indentured labour. Despite the many theoretical difficulties implied in the task, I have always been mindful of foregrounding convicts' agency in my research, most recently in a biographical project called *Subaltern Lives*. Here, I attempted to use the experiences of a range of ordinary people who were transported to or who were associated with penal settlements as a kaleidoscope into convict transportation, as well as into larger questions of society and social change in the Indian Ocean world.¹³

I am certain that my fascination with mobility, and my respect for people who inhabit the margins or periphery of society, comes out of my own journey across economic, social and cultural worlds. I have also found that my interpretation of the experience of penal transportation has changed with alterations in my family life. In the years since I became a mother, first in 2003 and then in 2005, and again in 2008 when my father died, my understanding of the meaning of the mobility invoked by penal transportation has undergone a profound change. As a young woman, I interpreted it partly as an opportunity to leave behind often-distressed circumstances and to forge a new life in a place where new identities were up for grabs. I now find reading histories of family separation unbearable: whether they relate to men and women leaving behind babies, children and sick or elderly parents; or desperate letters and petitions written in the hope of news or reunion in the face of serious illness. This brings me to my next point. Though many historians seek a personal distance from the archive, through their 'objective' handling of documents, others take a self-acknowledged positionality in their work. Pioneering feminists, for instance, have

¹³ Clare Anderson, *Subaltern Lives: Biographies of Colonialism in the Indian Ocean World, 1790-1920* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012).

researched social and cultural history with real meaning for their lives, including those where race struggles intersected with those of gender.¹⁴ Sociologist Liz Stanley has coined a brilliant expression for such feminist historical practice, and its acceptance that all research represents a choice among many and will always be selective and partial: *The Auto/Biographical I*.¹⁵

I spent four years in the Department of Sociology at the University of Warwick, 2007-11. It was at this time that I became centrally focused on questions of history and method described above, as well as two further, interrelated issues, greatly stimulated by my fellowship in Warwick's recently established Global History and Culture Centre.¹⁶ These were: the bringing together of subaltern history with transnational or global history, and the critical interrogation of the aftermath of Empire. I was fortunate enough to enjoy an extremely collegial working relationship with a fourth key influence on my research: David Arnold, who was also at Warwick, and a member of the Centre at this time. My work grew to call for an engagement with the scattering of archives of mobility across national repositories, and histories of colonies/nation states decentred by histories written from multiple, connected archives. It also urged taking seriously ethnographic work, not through the production

¹⁴ I must note here Catherine Hall's pioneering work, including, co-authored with Leonore Davidoff, the classic *Family Fortunes: Men and Women of the English Middle Class, 1780-1850* (London: Hutchinson, 1987), and the more recent exploration of Britain and Jamaica, *Civilising Subjects: Metropole and Colony in the English Imagination, 1830-1867* (Oxford: Polity, 2002). Other hugely important works published in Australia, and engaging with Indigenous rights, are Anne Curthoys' *For and Against Feminism: A Personal Journey into Feminist Theory and History* (Sydney: Allen and Unwin, 1998); and *Freedom Ride: A Freedomrider Remembers* (Sydney: Allen and Unwin, 2002).

¹⁵ Liz Stanley, *The Auto/Biographical I: The Theory and Practice of Feminist Auto/Biography* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1992).

¹⁶ See especially a recent collection of essays, edited by the Centre's founding director, Maxine Berg: *Writing the History of the Global: Challenges for the 21st Century* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013); and the Centre's homepage at <http://www2.warwick.ac.uk/fac/arts/history/ghcc/> (accessed 4 August 2014).

of conventional oral history, but in research on people's understandings of imperial history and its relationship to the societies in which they (and we) live.¹⁷

These interests developed most keenly in collaboration with two eminent Indian scholars who live and work in Gujarat: historian of science, Madhumita Mazumdar, and anthropologist Vishvajit Pandya. Over a four-year period, after a chance meeting at a conference at the University of Sussex, together we undertook a research project on the Andaman Islands, which had been the largest penal colony in the British Empire, excepting Australia. We sought scholarly integration of the history of the Islands' Indigenous peoples, and convict, refugee and other migrant settlers; and attempted to bring together historical research with anthropological/ethnographic method. Using an archive base spread across three continents, our research narrative interrogated how society, culture and political economy in the Andamans have been historically constituted. Critically, it offered also interpretations of how history is understood in the Islands today, and how it has been deployed (and contested) in the making of nation, community and identity. For me, this Global North/Global South collaboration has made an important political point, not just through the bringing together of equals in the practice of scholarly research and writing on Empire, but in engaging with the aftermath and meaning of Empire in people's lives today.¹⁸

The ongoing significance of Empire in both respects has been central to the development of my research methodologies, not just through the near-identical

¹⁷ For a working through of these themes in the Indian Ocean context, see Clare Anderson 'Subaltern Lives: History, Identity and Memory in the Indian Ocean World', *History Compass*, vol. 11, no. 7 (2013): 503-7.

¹⁸ Clare Anderson, Madhumita Mazumdar and Vishvajit Pandya, *New Histories of the Andaman Islands: Landscapes in the Bay of Bengal, 1790-2012* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015). I acknowledge with gratitude the support of the Economic and Social Research Council, for the project 'Integrated Histories of the Andaman Islands,' 2009-13 (award no. RES-000-22-3484.) Our project was one of the first pilots in international collaboration, which has since been rolled out across the ESRC's various funding schemes.

structure of the academy in Britain and South Asia, which has made my work with Indian scholars possible, but through the centering of ethnographic and anthropological work in an historical project. In bringing this chapter to a close, I want to discuss how writing with and through the archives of the Andamans, in a South Asian context, my professional became linked to my personal life in unanticipated and unexpected ways.

My story relates to my study of the ‘local-born’ community in the Andamans, that is to say the men and women who are descended from transported convicts and who live in the Islands today. Because the convicts came from all over India, and were forced into culturally unfamiliar living, working and marriage practices, many mainland forms of social difference and distinction, including caste and gender relations, were transformed. Today the Islands are known as ‘mini India’; a place of ‘unity in diversity’, or what scholars might call a cosmopolitanism space.

I had pieced together a history of the local-borns using the archives of Empire in Britain and India, and as the project unfolded I became curious to find out how local-born people made sense of their convict past. Between 2010-13 I undertook a series of interviews in the Aberdeen Bazaar area of Port Blair, where many local born families live. Many of the elderly residents had lived through the Japanese occupation of the Andamans during the Second World War, and had witnessed the transition to Indian Independence that started in 1947 and ultimately led to the political assimilation of the Andamans as a Union Territory of the Republic.

The elderly residents of Port Blair had been born at about the same time as my father and his brothers; and though there were significant differences in the communities to which our respective families belonged, and between our cultures, I was struck by the familiarity of local-born refrains about the past and the present. In

the small East Anglian village where I grew up, the War was a vital social reference point for many people. At that time, many established families also expressed discomfort about ‘incomers,’ people who did not ‘belong’ to the village, and their negative impact on country ways of life. As people spoke to me about their nostalgia for the old days, and of their worries that new migrants to the Islands did not understand or respect the Andamans’ unique culture, I was reminded of the concerns and laments of people in my home place.

As our work in the Andamans progressed, I could not but think of my own upbringing, and also as a person now living away from my home place, my implication in what was experienced by others as change or loss. In both my home place, and the home place of the people I was researching, this was the passing of an era as the pace and way of life shifted. I know that I am part of this social upheaval, for through my education and social and geographical mobility I constitute some of the shifts that bring together the sighs of elderly people across distant continents and oceans. And though I am able both to understand and to rationalize it, this fact remains nonetheless profoundly discomfoting.