

Women's Perspectives on Malaya: Isabella Bird on the Chersonese



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*"There is not very much comfort when one leaves the beaten tracks of travel,
but any loss is far more than made up for by the intense enjoyment."*

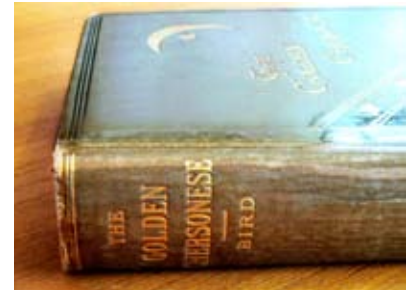
(Bird, 1883, p. 216)

ISABELLA BIRD: THE ACCIDENTAL TOURIST

Born in 1831 in England, Isabella Bird was a celebrated travel writer known for her momentous journeys across various continents. She explored the wild unknown with the barest minimum, mostly on her own — uncommonly adventurous for a woman during the conservative Victorian era.

But travel and travel writing were not something she was naturally inclined towards. One of her obituary notices described her as, "The invalid at home, the Samson abroad,"¹ succinctly capturing her contradictory nature. Throughout her life, she was afflicted by ailments, with such varied symptoms that her physicians were often left in a quandary as to the diagnosis of her diseases. At 18, she had an operation to remove a lump from her spine. Thereafter, she suffered from insomnia, nausea and pain, and was often bedridden, barely able to amble out of her home. Miraculously, these sufferings were dispelled when she travelled abroad.² In fact, some concluded that the travels served as a panacea to a constrained life at home.

Bird made her first journey at the age of 23 to North America to visit her relatives. It was made on doctor's orders to recuperate from a bad back, though some say that it was prescribed to help her recover from love-sickness. Thereafter, the travel bug that bit her remained with her.



A first edition of *The Golden Chersonese* (1883). Rare Materials Collection, National Library Singapore.

Bird travelled more widely in her middle age after the death of her mother, she traversed the wide expanse of the Americas, Australia and New Zealand and through the wild lands of Asia such as China, Korea, Malaya and the Middle East. In total, she travelled for more than nine years, though there were long periods when she stayed home. Age did not mellow her venturesome spirit and she chose to explore harsher lands and take on more challenging adventures even as she entered her 70s.

Most of Bird's early books were based on letters she had written to her only sibling, Henrietta. "In writing to my sister my first aim was accuracy, and my next to make her see what I saw" (Bird, 1883, p. viii) However, Henrietta was not just a home-bound shrinking violet who merely received her adventurous sister's letters. In fact, she was considered the more academic of the two,³ having a fluency in classical languages such as Greek and Latin.



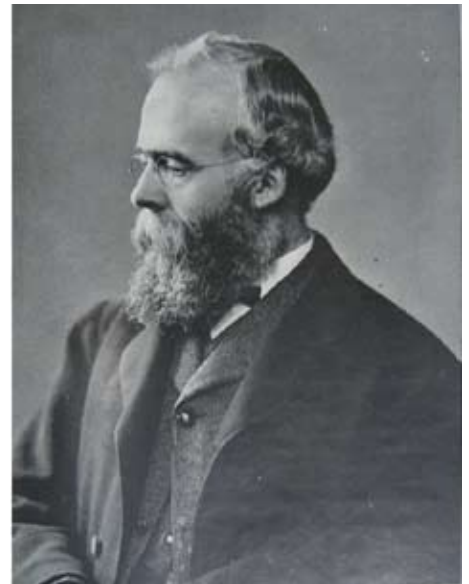
Isabella Bird's first ride in Perak (Bird, 1883, frontispiece).



Henrietta Amelia Bird (Stoddart, 1908, p. 122).



Isabella Bird (Stoddart, 1908, Frontispiece).



Dr John Bishop (Stoddart, 1908, p. 118).

It was Henrietta who had suggested titling Bird's Malayan travels *The Golden Chersonese*, based on her knowledge of Ptolemaic history and its mention in Milton's poems. There has been speculation that Henrietta had literally co-written much of Isabella's earlier books.⁴ Bird herself had acknowledged her sister as "[her] intellect, the inspiration of all [her] literary work."⁵ For *The Chersonese*, Bird acknowledged that "[Henrietta's] able and careful criticism, as well as loving interest, accompanied [her] former volumes through the press." (Bird, 1883, Preface, p. vii). *The Chersonese*, however was Bird's last book based on her letters to Henrietta. Henrietta died in 1880 soon after Bird returned from Malaya. Bird expressed her sense of loss noting that the book was written "under the heavy shadow of the loss of the beloved and only sister" (ibid., Preface, p. vii) and dedicated *The Chersonese* to her: "To a beloved memory, this volume is earnestly and sorrowfully dedicated." Henrietta's death not only affected Bird emotionally, but likely also her writings. While researching for *The Chersonese*, Bird had appealed several times to John Murray, her publisher, to provide materials to pad up her limited knowledge on Malaya — something which Chubbuck believes Henrietta, if alive, would have invariably supplied to her sister.⁶

The Chersonese was Bird's first book published after her marriage. Dr John Bishop, a learned and quiet man, who was 10 years younger than Bird, proposed to her in 1877. It is believed that Bird spurned him initially as Henrietta had fallen for him.⁷ It was only after the death of her sister that Bird married the doctor in 1881, purportedly fulfilling her sister's dying wish. Bird, who was 50 years old then, dramatically wore mourning black for her wedding finery. Although it is believed that Bird was not truly in love with Dr Bishop, she mourned him deeply when he died five years into the marriage.

THE PROTECTED MALAY STATES: TERRA INCOGNITA

The Golden Chersonese was the half-way mark of Bird's published travelogues, which totalled nine titles. In twenty-three

letters, Bird wrote about the British presence in Malaya, namely in the Straits Settlements — Singapore, Malacca and Penang — and in the three Protected Malay States — Perak, Selangor and Sungei Ujong⁸ — which had recently come under a British Residential System. Although the letters seem informal and fluid, the publication is in fact tightly structured. For example, the introduction to the book provides an overview of Malaya, its history, politics, people and landscapes. In a similar pattern, her descriptions of her travels through each Settlement or State is prefaced with a brief survey of the province before she gives her observations of and adventures in these places. However, the book is not solely about Malaya. It begins with a description of China and Bird's journey down south, with a stop over in Saigon, Vietnam before it elaborates on the Protected Malay States. It ends with an appendix, which describes the Residential system, the government's opposing slavery and the various letters by Hugh Low.

Bird visited the Protected Malay States a few years after they were newly established as Protected States in 1876. Tin mining was the main industry but these States remained a wild and unexplored outpost for the British officials. In her introductory chapter, Bird noted that contemporaneous Malaya was a terra incognita: "there is no point on its mainland at which European steamers call, and the usual conception of it is a vast and malarious equatorial jungle sparsely peopled by a race of semi-civilised and treacherous Mohammedans." (ibid., p. 1) However, Bird's survey of the land was brief and necessarily limited as it was based on a mere five-week sojourn which she made chaperoned by British officials, travelling with official transport and lodging in the comfort of their homes.

SINGAPORE: A CHINESE CITY

Bird's travels through the Malay Peninsula began in Singapore,⁹ a pit-stop made on her return journey from Japan in 1879. Her fame had preceded her and she was quickly invited by Cecil Clementi Smith, then Colonial Secretary, to visit the newly formed Protected Malay States. Smith probably saw an

opportunity to publicise the value of the Malay States through the writings of a well-known author while Bird took this as another chance at adventure. All she needed were additional cash and necessary letters of introduction before she quickly agreed to “escape from civilization” (ibid., p. 109).

While she considered Singapore too well-known to elaborate on, Bird still gives a vivid vision of the harried, varied people in the growing port city:

How I wish I could convey an idea, however faint, of this huge, mingled, coloured, busy, Oriental population; of the old Kling and Chinese bazaars; of the itinerant sellers of seaweed jelly, water, vegetables, soup, fruit and cooked fish, whose unintelligible street cries are heard above the din of the crowds of coolies, boatmen, and gharriemen waiting for hire; of the far-stretching suburbs of Malay and Chinese cottages; of the sheet of water, by no means clean, round which hundreds of Bengalis are to be seen at all hours of daylight unmercifully beating on great stones the delicate laces, gauzy silks, and elaborate flouncings of the European ladies; of the ceaseless rush and hum of industry, and of the resistless, overpowering astonishing Chinese element, which is gradually turning Singapore into a Chinese city! (Bird, 1883, pp. 119–120)

Details accompany Bird’s descriptions, but they are neither dogmatic nor boring, always informing and giving flesh to a general impression. Her first biographer, Anna Stoddart, recognised Bird’s “capacity for accurate observation, her retentive memory, and her power of vivid portrayal, [that] have enabled multitudes to share her experiences and adventures in those lands beyond the pale which drew her ever with magnetic force.” (Stoddart, 1908, p. v) Take for example her detailed description of the many tribes that made up Singapore’s populace in the late 19th century:

The English, though powerful as the ruling race, are numerically nowhere, and certainly make no impression on the eye. The Chinese ... are not only numerous enough, but rich and important enough to give Singapore the air of a Chinese town with a foreign settlement ... the native Malays ... who, besides being tolerably industrious as boatmen and fishermen, form the main body of the police. The Parsee merchants ... form a respectable class of merchants The Javanese are numerous, and make good servants and sailors. Some of the small merchants and many of the clerks are Portuguese immigrants from Malacca; and traders from Borneo, Sumatra, Celebes, Bali, and other islands of the Malay Archipelago are scattered among the throng. The washermen and grooms are nearly all Bengalees. Jews and Arabs make money and keep it, and are, as everywhere, shrewd and keen, and only meet their equals among the Chinese ... the Klings from the Coromandel coast ... are the most attractive in appearance” (Bird, 1883, pp. 114–115)

Indeed, her descriptions of people seem to favour the locals over her own compatriots sometimes taking a potshot at the latter’s apparent condescension toward native people and their

customs. This is vividly seen in her contrasting descriptions of the local Indian women and the upper crust European ladies in the town:

A tall, graceful Kling woman ... gliding along the pavement, her statuesque figure, the perfection of graceful ease, a dark pitcher on her head, just touched by the beautiful hand, showing the finely moulded arm, is a beautiful object, classical in form, exquisite in movement, and artistic in colouring, a creation of the tropic sun. What thinks she, I wonder, if she thinks at all, of the pale European, paler for want of exercise and engrossing occupation, who steps out of her carriage in front of her, an ungraceful heap of *poufs* and frills, tottering painfully on high heels, in tight boots, her figure distorted into the shape of a Japanese sake bottle, every movement a struggle or a jerk, the clothing utterly unsuited to this or any climate, impeding motion, and affecting health, comfort, and beauty alike? (ibid., p. 117)

THE MALAYANS: A WOMAN’S PERSPECTIVE

Stoddart noted that “as a traveler, Mrs Bishop’s outstanding merit is that she nearly always conquered her territories alone; that she faced the wilderness almost single-handed[ly] ...” (Stoddart, 1908, p. vi). That was how she travelled when she first took off to explore the Malay States. She boarded a small Chinese-owned boat, the *Rainbow*, to Malacca — being the only European and female traveller onboard. However, Bird was not always alone in her Malayan adventures. On much of the journey inland, she was accompanied by Babu, a native butler of sorts, the governor’s two young daughters and up to 11 other workers.

As a woman, Bird was privileged to see the more intimate side of Malayan life. She was sometimes invited to meet locals of the fairer sex and their children and she often took pains to describe the women, their dress and appearances as well as the children. In one instance, she was invited to meet a Sikh guard’s family, whom her male companions comprising officials in high leadership positions had not met before. Upon seeing the guard’s wife, Bird exclaimed in awe:

She is very beautiful, and has an exquisite figure, but was overloaded with jewellery She had an infant boy ... in her arms, clothed only in a silver hoop, and the father took him and presented him to me with much pride. It was a pleasant family group. (Bird, 1883, p. 291)



A Kling (Bird, 1883, p. 254).

The Chersonese not only offers a peek into the communities of the newly formed Malay States, but it also gives anecdotal accounts of the people who led the Protected Malay States. In fact, “the individuals Bird’s narrative sketches are almost entirely British administrators, the empire builders engaged in the great work of creating British Malaya. They turn out to be people who were then in the process of developing extensive reputations in England, and who would, in the three decades following the publication of Bird’s book, reach enormous fame.”¹⁰ One such individual was William Edward Maxwell, whom Bird met in Perak. He was then a newly appointed Assistant Resident, but soon rose to become the Acting Resident Councillor of Penang (1887–1889) and Acting Governor (1891–1895). She described Maxwell thus:

A man on whose word one may implicitly rely. Brought up among Malays, and speaking their language idiomatically, he not only likes them, but takes the trouble to understand them and enter into their ideas and feelings I have the very pleasant feeling regarding him that he is the right man in the right place. (ibid., pp. 285–286)

She then continued to describe the convivial repartee over dinner between Maxwell, Captain Walker and Major Swineburne, her travel companions, doubting that “such an argument could have been got up in moist, hot Singapore, or steamy Malacca! ... That it should be possible shows what an invigorating climate this must be.” (ibid., p. 286)

THE GOLDEN CHERSONESE: ROMANCE OR REALISM?

Though some have criticised Bird for romanticising her description of the Malay States, she did not censor her more negative impressions of the Peninsula or gloss over the challenges she faced. Indeed, she sometimes seemed to relish the more horrid experiences and observations. Such was the case when she first arrived in Selangor, where she described the squalid conditions of the village by the river — “Slime was everywhere oozing, bubbling, smelling putrid in the sun, all glimmering, shining, and iridescent, breeding fever and horrible life” (ibid., p. 243)

Even minor irritations were mentioned as seen in her frequent complaints of incessant mosquitoes biting ceaselessly and the disappointment of sometimes expecting a meal from a host after a long day of travel, but never receiving one.¹¹

The adverse circumstances, however, brought out Bird’s resourcefulness. She devised an innovative approach to protect herself from the heat of the sun:

I wear a straw hat with the sides and low crown thickly wadded. I also have a strip four inches broad of three thicknesses of wadding, sewn into the middle of the

back of my jacket, and usually wear in addition a coarse towel wrung out in water, folded on top of my head, and hanging down the back of my neck. (ibid., p. 253)

When her elephant ride from Larut to Kwala Kangsar [sic] did not materialise due to some miscommunication, and she had to walk the four miles through quagmire and jungle, she recognised that she “could not have done the half of it had [she] not had [her] ‘mountain dress’ on ...” (ibid., p. 293). She finally meets her elephant, which had “nothing grand about him but his ugliness” (ibid., p. 298).

Even in the midst of these challenges, she was able to contemplate the uniqueness of her circumstances, sometimes describing them in such wondrous tones despite the apparent dangers and discomforts she faced. Here, she gave the context to her elephant ride:

I am making my narrative as slow as my journey, but the things I write of will be as new to you as they were to me. New it was certainly to stand upon a carpet of the sensitive plant at noon, with the rays of a nearly vertical sun streaming down from a cloudless, steely blue sky, watching the jungle monster meekly kneeling on the ground with two Malays who do not know a word of English as my companions, and myself unarmed and unescorted in the heart of a region so lately the scene of war, about which seven blue books have been written, and about the lawlessness and violence of which so many stories have been industriously circulated. (ibid., p. 340)

Caught between ailment and adventure, the familiar and the strange, her countrymen and savage beasts, Bird provided her readers with a sense of feminine wonderment that colours the landscapes of the Malay States with a peculiar attractiveness.

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An equatorial jungle stream (Bird, 1883, facing p. 227).

ENDNOTES

- Mrs Bishop. (1904). *Edinburgh Medical Journal*, 14, p. 383.
- Checkland suggests that much of her ailments were due to the drugs she imbibed during her home stay, some of which were potent drugs such as cannabis and opium. Her travels healed her as she no longer consumed these potent mixes (p. 32). Chubbuck believes that her actual disease was carbunculus resulting in "infectious knobs" appearing on the spine and back. However, Chubbuck also notes that Bird's sufferings were likely psychosomatic (pp. 5–6).
- Chubbuck, pp. 9–10.
- Chubbuck, pp. 13–14. Chubbuck also suggests that the sisters' relationship was not as congenial as it seemed but Victorian conservatism did not allow Isabella to express fully the competitiveness that was likely to have existed between them. Nevertheless, Isabella was devastated following her sister's death from typhoid in 1880.
- From a letter by Bird to John Murray III dated June 16, 1880, as found in the John Murray Archives and cited in Chubbuck, p. 14.
- Ibid.
- Chubbuck, p. 15.
- Though Bird describes only Sungei Ujong, this state later joined other adjoining states of Negri Sembilan. During this period however, Sungei Ujong was administered independently under the British (Sadka, p. 1).
- In fact, the first six letters of *The Golden Chersonese* narrates her travels down from China, through Hong Kong and Saigon, Vietnam. Her visit to Singapore is mentioned only in the seventh letter, about a quarter through her title.
- Morgan, S., 1996, p. 152.
- At Permatang in Perak for example, she was relieved to hear her host discussing breakfast. But after a bath, the visitors were expected to leave immediately, without the much desired meal. (Bird, 1883, pp. 279–280).
- The National Library has the original 1883 copy by John Murray, one of which belongs to the collection of the learned curator, Dr Gibson-Hill. The reprints were also acquired by the library including recent reprints by Konemann (2000) and Monsoon Books (2010). Besides this, the Library holds several of Bird's other travelogues as well as analysis, commentaries and criticisms of her works and biographies along with studies of her life.

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