

Women's Perspectives On Malaya Emily Innes On The Malay States



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"I think that in most of these tropical colonies the ladies exist only on the hope of going "home!" It is a dreary, aimless life for them — scarcely life, only existence."
(Bird, 1883, p. 110)

Emily Innes: Depicting the Chersonese

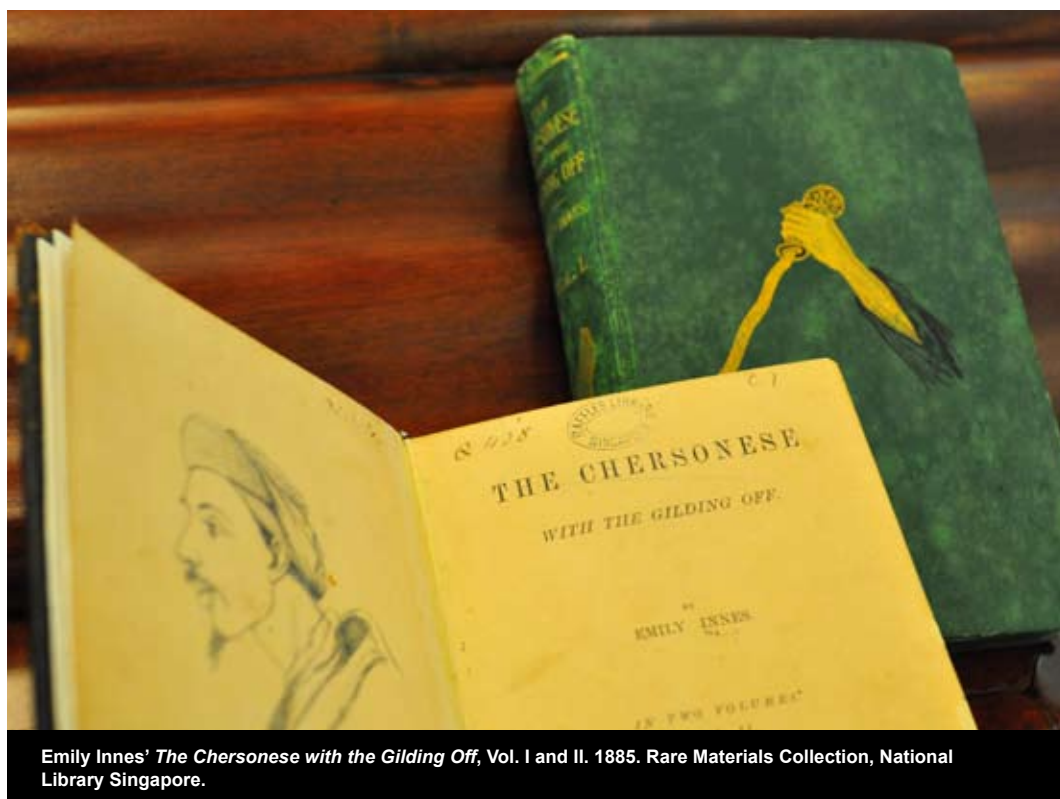
By the late 19th century, travelogues, surveys and government studies had covered much of Southeast Asia but most of these publications were written by men. The only women writers published were famed travel writers like Isabella Bird or wives of missionaries like Harriette McDougall. Emily Innes' publication, *The Chersonese with the Gilding Off* (1883), thus stands apart from the work of her female compatriots because she wrote as the wife of a minor British official at a time when few colonial wives had their insights published.

James Innes had been appointed Collector and Magistrate at Kuala Langat in Selangor in 1877. He had earlier served in Sarawak and

had quickly risen to become Treasurer. Research showed that he had, unfortunately, faced problems with money throughout his career.¹ James also proved impractical², shortsighted³ and unable to relate with his superiors⁴. In a way, Emily's book was written as a defence for her husband who had resigned his post after six years; his conflict with the Resident, Captain Bloomfield Douglas, being the main reason, though Emily's stated reason is James' opposition to slavery in the Malay States.

The two-volume work however depicts more than the Inneses' dissatisfaction with the greater government and their acrimonious relationship with the Douglasses. Tin mining production in Perak and Selangor had risen spectacularly in the 1870s, with the introduction of innovative tin mining methods adapted from Chinese rice planting irrigation techniques.⁵ In fact, the lucrative tin mining business saw Chinese immigrants increasing by large numbers in the Malay States.⁶ The explosive mix of wealth, new immigrants and old Malay rulers led to wars and conflicts. The British mediated at the invitation of local rulers, profiting at the same time — a period known as the British intervention. As the Inneses had resided at the Protected Malay States just after British intervention in 1874, Emily's book gives a contemporaneous and vivid account from the unique perspective of the first British woman living in the interiors of the Peninsula. Self-taught in Malay, Emily's descriptions of the Malay rulers, their villages and villagers as well as their initial reaction to British presence during intervention have proved valuable to historians studying this period (Gullick, 1993, p. 170).

Her publication is also interesting for its obvious play against the more famous work of Isabella Bird's, *The Golden Chersonese* (1883).⁷ Giving the perspective of



Emily Innes' *The Chersonese with the Gilding Off*, Vol. I and II. 1885. Rare Materials Collection, National Library Singapore.



Collector's bungalow at Bandar Langat (Innes, 1885, Vol. 1, frontispiece).

a resident instead of an acclaimed traveller, Innes wrote her piece "in contradistinction [to Bird's] but with no aim of contradiction" (Doran, 2008, p. 175). Bird's account of the Malay states was of five weeks between January and February 1879, while Emily's is of her five-year residency from 1876 until her husband's resignation in 1882.

Emily herself acknowledges the value and yet contrasting realities both authors portray in their writings:

To those who have read Miss Bird's most interesting book, the 'Golden Chersonese' — a book that was specially delightful to Mr Innes and myself, since we felt as if we had known personally every creature, every thing, and almost every mosquito she mentioned — it may seem curious that, notwithstanding the brilliancy and attractiveness of her descriptions, and the dullness and gloom of mine, I can honestly say that her account is perfectly and literally true. So is mine. The explanation is that she and I saw the Malayan country under totally different circumstances. (Innes, 1885, Vol. 2, p. 242)

Indeed where Isabella visited the Malay States under the protection and support of government officials, "Emily Innes was ... forced to endure — although with great bravado — the drudgery of swampy, lugubrious isolation, rickety atap-houses, a cretinous native society, deceitful servants and scarce food supply — not to mention a

traumatic, near-fatal experience involving revolting Chinese coolies" (Wong, 1999).

Surviving the Chersonese

Volume 1 describes the Inneses at Langat,⁸ their first lodgings and experiences in the Protected Malay States while Volume 2 is of their stay at Durian Sabatang. Neither posting was comfortable, with the latter worse than the former. So depressing were their circumstances that, having just arrived at their "Malay wigwam" in Langat and taken a short walk to survey their surroundings in what little civilisation there was, they "agreed aloud that if [they] had to remain six months in this fearful place [they] must either leave the service or commit suicide" (Innes, p. 19). However, the Inneses survived not just six months but six years in the Malay States.

Though some have said Emily's writings reflect "the mark of acute paranoia" (Heussler, 1981, p. 67), one must consider her dire circumstances. There was no ladies' club or any other foreign women to commiserate with — only the intrusive locals and the overbearing sounds and sights of village life. Without children and at times, even a husband at home to occupy her, boredom was her constant companion.

Though her life was painfully boring, she wrote of her experiences and encounters with the wry sense of humour peculiar to the British:



Elk horn fern (Bird, 1883, p. 177).

Some of the day was got rid of by bathing two or three times, and the consequent dressing and undressing ... some more time was disposed of in eating and drinking — or rather in sitting at the table and looking at food — for the debilitating effects of the climate and want of exercise did not leave us much appetite. There were still many hours during which we either had nothing to do, or could do nothing, from heat, ennui, and mosquitoes. (Innes, 1885, pp. 35–36)

For the well-read Emily, the only recourse to fighting the boredom was turning to books but unfortunately, her attempts at obtaining reading materials were unsuccessful:

We tried to get books from the Circulating Library in Singapore, but failed because there were only two Europeans in the districts and there was no regular communication at all between Langat

and the outside world Having failed in this direction, we sent home for books and newspapers. We ordered six of the latter, besides several magazines, to be constantly sent to us, but from various causes we did not reap the full benefit of this arrangement. Our papers, especially the illustrated ones, were more often than not stolen, or delayed for months ... (pp. 34–35)

Unable to escape into some form of leisure, Emily turned to studying the local habits and dispassionately describing her own struggles.

Much of Volume 1 thus documents mundane activities such as her attempts at cooking a decent meal with limited and poor quality resources, the native behaviour of her Malay neighbours and the level of hygiene in the village or rather the lack of it. This volume also provides details about James Innes' work and relationships with the locals and his colleagues, along with insights on personalities such as Bloomfield Douglas, Resident of Selangor and Tunku Dia Udin, the Viceroy of Selangor — a critical character in the history

of modern Selangor. The characters are rendered from a biased perspective because of the relationship she had with each of these personalities. Even so, they present unique angles for researchers, particularly as she wrote these descriptions from the perspective of a woman, and that of a wife of a British official.

Volume 2 describes the Inneses' reluctant transfer to Durian Sabatang, the "white man's grave"⁹ (Innes, p. 55), just as their more comfortable bungalow, designed by James Innes himself, was completed at Langat. A large part is devoted to an account of the tragic murder of Captain Lloyd,



The Tunku Muda (Innes, Frontispiece to Vol. II)



Malay youth and maiden (Bird, 1883, p. 328).

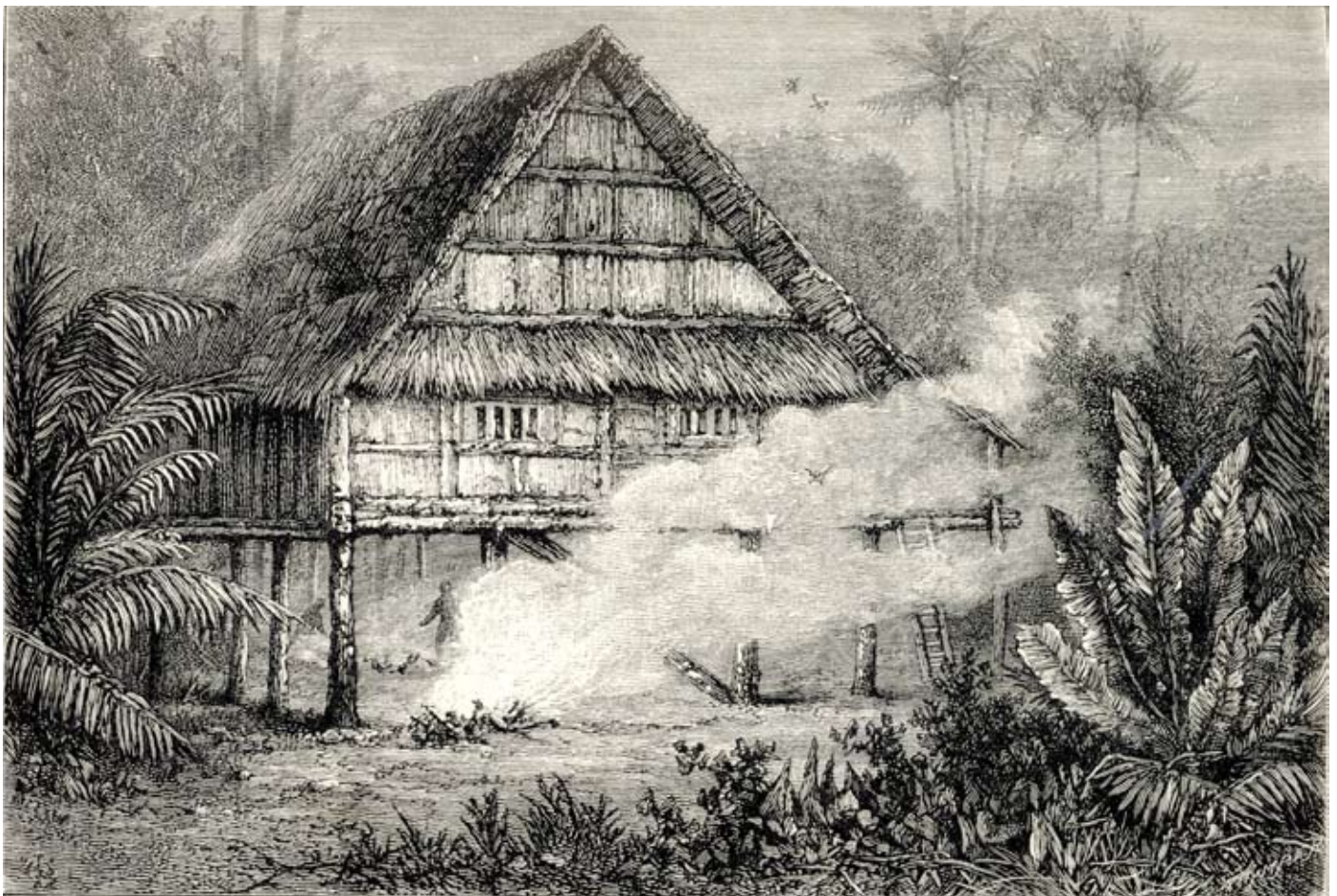
Superintendent of Dindings, at Pangkor and to the injuries sustained by Emily during the attack. Being new to the district and facing some discomfort, Emily had been invited to the Lloyds' home: "I had never seen either of them, but that was of no consequence in a country where English are so rare that all are to a certain extent brothers" (Vol. 2, p. 91). In fact, the day Emily arrived, the Lloyds' servants had not yet returned since receiving their pay and Mrs Lloyd, with

three young children on hand, was in a quandary. The Lloyds' troubles were only just beginning, as unemployed Chinese labourers in nearby Lumut saw the isolated Lloyds as a vulnerable and attractive target for a robbery. Unfortunately, Emily was a guest of the Lloyds on that fateful day such occurred. Mrs Lloyd and Emily were seriously injured in the attack on the family home but both survived the assault.

The tragedy saw Emily return on home leave, followed soon after by James who had become ill due to the conditions at Durian Sabatang. Although James returned to Bandar, he resigned within two years because of continued poor relations with the Resident. James' departure from his position in the Malay

States and the resultant loss of his much desired pension gave Emily the impetus to write this explanatory autobiography commenting on the injustices the Inneses had suffered under the poor leadership of their British compatriots.¹⁰ ■

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Smoking the mosquitoes (Bird, 1883, facing p. 138).

ENDNOTES

- 1 Gullick details some of James Innes' inadequacies in managing finances, a characteristic which likely led to problems with his superiors particularly in his role as Treasurer and Collector. Gullick, J. M. (1993). pp. 162–164, 167–169.
- 2 For example, Emily was made to trudge through the wilderness at her husband's whim, a supposedly short few miles to the main town. However, her flouncy and uncomfortable English dress, the muddy conditions, the failing light of twilight and James' forgetting his way meant the party was soon lost in the dark and Emily left in great discomfort.
- 3 James resigned his post in Malaya only to regret this much later as he forfeited a pension subsequently linked to his position.
- 4 Although initially the Inneses seemed to get along with the Resident at Selangor, Bloomfield Douglas, relations quickly deteriorated.
- 5 Sadka, 1968, pp. 20–21
- 6 Ibid.
- 7 The women had never met but Isabella was escorted through Selangor by James. Isabella notes that James was in "dejected spirits, as if the swamps of Durian Sabatang had been too much for him" (Bird, 1883, p. 276) though in her private letters, Isabella mentions that she found James "a man with a feeble, despairing manner and vague unfocussed eyes ... a very dreary and unintelligent companion" (Bird & Chubbuck, 2002, p. 273).
- 8 Today, the district is known as Kuala Langat. The Klang Wars of 1868 saw the royal town move from the ancient centre of Jugra to Bandar Temasya and the town became key to the development of Selangor during the reign of Sultan Abdul Samad Ibn Almarhum Raja Abdullah (Port Klang Integrated Coastal Management Project).
- 9 A name given for the "unhealthiness of its climate" (Innes, p. 55).
- 10 A note from Ernest Chew: "Captain Bloomfield Douglas was succeeded as British Resident of Selangor by the youthful and more efficient Frank Swettenham, who subsequently became Resident of Perak, Resident-General of the four Federated Malay States, and finally Governor of the Straits Settlements and High Commissioner for the Malay States."
- 11 The National Library has several sets of the original publication published by Richard Bentley in 1885. They can also be read on microfilm NL26023 (Vol. 1) and NL7462 (Vol. II). The Library also holds more recent Oxford University Press reprints with a useful introduction by Khoo Kay Kim, published in 1974 and again in 1993.

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