

HISTORICAL CONSTRUCTIONS OF RAFFLES' WIVES

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In the early nineteenth century hundreds of British women spent at least part of their lives in Britain's Southeast Asian colonies: the Straits Settlements (Penang, Melaka and Singapore), Java, and Bengkulu in south-western Sumatra. Most were there because of family relationships, as wives, sisters or daughters of British administrators, merchants, planters, soldiers, sailors and missionaries; a few single women also came to work as teachers, governesses, nurses and so on. Yet in general these women have received scarcely a mention in mainstream historical accounts of British colonialism in Southeast Asia.¹ Until recently such histories have been imbued with a masculine ethos of imperial expansionism which allowed little scope for the contributions of women. Although more recent histories are no longer dominated by imperialist sentiment, the cursory treatment accorded to women suggests that the masculinist orientation has yet to be overcome.² However, there have been two notable exceptions to this general invisibility of women in colonial history. Two women, Olivia Devenish and Sophia Hull, have attracted unequalled attention from historians - not in their own right, but because of their connections with an archetypal British imperialist: Thomas Stamford Raffles, administrator in Penang, lieutenant governor of Java, lieutenant governor of Bengkulu, and founder of British Singapore.

The aim of this paper is to analyse the historiography, to examine the ways in which Raffles' wives, Olivia and Sophia, have been represented in historical writing. As will be shown, historians' portraits of these women have focused on a narrow range of issues revolving around beauty and attractiveness, and the roles of a helpmeet. It will also be argued that historical writing on the two women has been deeply affected by an entrenched psychological predisposition to categorise them in terms of a madonna-whore dichotomy. It is proposed, therefore, that a critical approach to the pronouncements of historians about Raffles' wives is the first necessary step towards re-writing (or rather writing) the history of British women who were involved in the Southeast Asian colonies, a history almost entirely neglected to date.

MADONNAS AND WHORES

The idea of a madonna-whore dichotomy derives from Sigmund Freud who, in 1912, drew attention to a psychological malaise which he found so widespread in his society that he called it "the most prevalent form of degradation in erotic life". The problem, as he saw it, arose from an arrest or blockage of psycho-sexual development: "during

the course of development of the libido to that ultimate form which may be called normal...two currents of feeling have to unite - we may describe them as the tender, affectionate feelings and the sensual feelings" (Freud 1924, 204). That this confluence of emotions often failed to occur was of great significance for social life and for gender relations:

In only very few people of culture are the two strains of tenderness and sensuality duly fused into one; the man almost always feels his sexual activity hampered by his respect for the woman and only develops full sexual potency when he finds himself in the presence of a lower type of sexual object.³

According to Freud, men attempt to overcome these deep psychological contradictions by relating to and thinking of women stereotypically in terms of two separate types: asexual or completely sexual, Virgin Mother Mary or Mary Magdalene, subject or object.

Freud was aware that this psycho-malaise was transtemporal, though not necessarily timeless. Such stereotypic thinking about women can be traced back to early Indo-European civilisation, to Greek culture, to the beginnings of Judeo-Christianity. It has already been used as a central motif in history writing, as in Anne Summers' *Damned Whores and God's Police*, which traces how the history of women in Australia has been determined by such stereotyping (Summers 1975). One of the aims of this paper is to show that the madonna-whore complex can affect historiography as much as history itself. The tendency to see women as falling into one of two sharply differentiated categories, to interpret historical evidence in terms of this typology, and when evidence is not available simply to assume that this is what women were like, can have a profound effect on the construction of history.

On the face of it, the madonna-whore complex identified by Freud may seem an oversimplification of complex gendered realities. Its use might seem to open up the pitfall of reductive binarism, the dangers of which (especially for women) feminist theorists have been at pains to show. However, as Juliet Mitchell has shown, psychoanalytic theories can be useful for feminists if they are seen as a means for analysis of a patriarchal society rather than a recommendation *for* one (1974, xv). Employed descriptively rather than prescriptively, and with sensitivity to historical, cultural and other sources of variability, Freudian categories have proved their value to feminist analysts as diverse in their approaches as de Beauvoir, Mitchell, Summers and Grosz (1990). The madonna-whore complex is employed here, certainly not in any prescriptive sense, nor even as a heuristic device, but descriptively, to identify a consistent tendency of thought which has deeply affected the practices of colonial historians over a period of about a century.

OVERVIEW OF RAFFLES HISTORIOGRAPHY

Thomas Stamford Raffles was born at sea off Jamaica in 1781. Little is known of his mother; his father was a ship's captain involved in West Indian trading. Raffles secured employment with the East India Company at the age of fourteen. After working for nine years as a lowly clerk in their office in Leadenhall Street, he was rewarded in 1805 with an appointment as assistant secretary in the company's administration in Penang. This was the beginning of an East Indian career which included posts at Penang, Batavia, Bengkulen and Singapore.⁴ Since virtually all of the comments of historians on Olivia and Sophia have been written within the context of studies of the life and career of Raffles, a brief survey of the considerable literature on Thomas Stamford Raffles is appropriate.

Raffles' first biographer was Demetrius Charles Boulger, whose *Life of Sir Stamford Raffles* (1897/1973) is still regarded by many as the standard work on the subject.

Boulger included many long excerpts from primary sources readily available to him at the India Office in London, but he did not have access to important documents which have since become widely known. The generally laudatory tone of Boulger's biography was taken up by his successors, Egerton (1900), Cook (1918) and Coupland (1926), who also drew largely on his painstaking research. Yet another tribute to Raffles came in 1921, when the Reverend William Cross M.A., a Presbyterian minister stationed in Singapore, contributed a chapter on the founder to a collection of essays marking the centenary of British settlement (Cross 1921, 32-68).

Although Dutch historians had long been critical of Raffles, both as an administrator and a man, it was not until 1946 that a biography in English broke the tradition of eulogy established by Boulger fifty years earlier. An American woman, Emily Hahn, published a popularised account of Raffles' life, *Raffles of Singapore*. Describing herself as "hack writer turned historian", Hahn admitted that her book would not "contribute to our knowledge of Raffles" because she had "nothing new to offer" (Hahn 1946, vii-viii). She was, however, able to use Dutch sources not usually available to English researchers. Like Sophia long before her, Hahn prefaced her extensive work on Raffles with self-deprecation, under the humble heading "Apologia".

A significant later biography was *Raffles of the Eastern Isles* (1954) by C.E. Wurtzburg, who spent part of his early career in Singapore. This was a long, thorough study, using documentary sources not accessed by previous writers. Nevertheless, Wurtzburg's account did not raise doubts concerning the integrity of Raffles' public career. On the other hand, Captain H.F. Pearson, who published a short biography, *This Other India* (1957), was more skeptical regarding Raffles'

claims to greatness and went so far as to question his honesty and probity.

The most serious challenge to Raffles' historical reputation came in 1971 from Syed Hussein Alatas, then Professor of Malay Studies at the University of Singapore. Drawing heavily on Dutch and Malay sources and commentaries, Alatas' iconoclastic account of Raffles' career called attention to several dishonourable episodes, including the Palembang massacre and Raffles' deportation of Javanese workers to develop the property of his friend, Alexander Hare, at Banjarmasin in Borneo. Alatas contended that Raffles was "on the side of the establishment, on the side of the expansionist, the war-monger, the capitalist, and of knockdown diplomacy" (Alatas 1971, 50).

The most prolific recent contributor to the study of Raffles is John Bastin, formerly of the School of Oriental and African Studies in London. Since the 1950s he has published widely on Raffles (eg. Bastin 1958, 1969) and more recently on Sophia as well (eg. Bastin 1995). Bastin's assessment of Raffles is positive on the whole, but more balanced than that of some previous enthusiasts.

Another popularised version of the Raffles story, more slight than Hahn's, appeared in *The Duke of Puddle Dock: Travels in the footsteps of Stamford Raffles* (1991). This was a light mix of history and travelogue by Nigel Barley, museum curator, anthropologist, travel writer and novelist. The title derived from a taunt aimed at Raffles by his aunt on account of his early ambitions for upward mobility.

These then are the main historical and biographical works which have dealt with Raffles and, usually in asides, with Olivia and Sophia. They were produced over a long period, almost a century, by authors with a wide variety of backgrounds. What is remarkable, and what this paper shows, is that there is a consistency and a continuity in their characterisations of the two women; moreover that these characterisations are reflections, not of the available evidence, but of the ingrained psychological tendencies inherent to patriarchal societies which were outlined in the section above.

INVENTING OLIVIA

Very little is known about the family origins or early life of Olivia Mariamne Devenish, or indeed her later life, despite assiduous research by Boulger, Wurtzburg and other historians interested in Raffles. Certainly there is a dearth of primary source material: only two of her letters are extant. Lack of information accounts, in part, for the air of mystery which has clung to her. As Nigel Barley commented in his recent attempt to retrace Raffles' life, Olivia remains "a shadowy figure. She has no voice

of her own" (Barley 1991, 114). The lack of solid evidence has given historians wide scope for imaginative construction, the results of which reveal more about the contents of their imaginations than about Olivia's life.

It is probable that Olivia Devenish was born in India in 1771 of a Circassian (Russian) mother and Irish father, that she was brought up in India and then taken to England by her parents (Wurtzburg 1954, 744-6). It is more certain that at the age of twenty-one, in 1792, she sailed back to India. She remained there for at least eight years, marrying Jacob Fancourt, an assistant-surgeon on the East India Company's Madras establishment, in 1793, and returned to England after his death in 1800 (Boulger 1897/1973, 10). She met Raffles four years later, at the age of thirty-three, when applying to India House in London for a widow's pension. Shortly after their marriage in 1805, Olivia accompanied Raffles to Penang. She went with him to Melaka during preparations for the British invasion of Java in 1811, and later fulfilled the duties of first lady in the British regime in Java. Olivia died in 1814.

Historical treatments of Olivia almost invariably begin with her physical attributes. Historians have been preoccupied with her attractiveness and good looks. Combining these with what was regarded as her exotic background in India, and her eastern European and Irish ancestry, they created a heady mix. Emily Hahn, for example, evoked Olivia's striking Latinate appearance, taking her cue from Boulger:

Her beauty was particularly noticeable in England, being of a type the British consider Latin; she was dark-haired and dark-eyed. Tall and distinguished-looking, Boulger calls her, with flashing black Italian eyes (Hahn 1946, 29-30).

H.F. Pearson elaborated upon Olivia's physical and other "assets":

She had the lively wit and subtle attraction of the Irish; she had the stately beauty of the Circassian women. She was tall, dark-haired, dark-eyed. The strange life she had led gave her an air of assurance; her allure was half of the East, mysterious, captivating (Pearson 1957, 14-5).

Olivia's physical characteristics and her family background formed the basis upon which historians constructed an image of a woman of beauty and allure, identified variously with Latin, gypsy, Irish and Asian women - all of whom shared in the British imagination associations with emotionality and high passion.

It is not surprising, then, that along with her vaunted beauty, historians have taken an interest in, and have exercised imagination over, Olivia's sexual history. In addition

to alleged affairs before she met Raffles, it has been asserted that Olivia had sexual and/or romantic liaisons with several of Raffles' colleagues and friends, including William Ramsay, Lord Minto and Dr John Leyden. Apart from an inherent prurient interest, these later relationships have been of particular concern to Raffles' biographers because these men assisted Raffles' career through preferment and patronage.

Before she left England for the first time, Olivia was supposedly the lover of Irish poet and writer, Thomas Moore, who was said to have composed "amatory elegies" in her honour. A source hostile to Raffles had suggested that Olivia herself made this claim when she was in Penang (Murray 1836).⁵ Wurtzburg lent his support to this shaky set of suppositions (1951, 173-5). There is then the allegation that Olivia had an illegitimate child fathered by the captain of the ship in which she sailed to India in 1792. In support of this view, John Bastin stated that this was rumoured in Penang and was later taken for granted within the Raffles family (Bastin 1958, 231-2). Olivia was also supposed to have been the mistress of William Ramsay, secretary of the East India Company during Raffles' early years at India House. Again, rumours to this effect were reportedly current in Penang during the Raffles' stay there.⁶

Ramsay was Raffles' superior and it was he who recommended Raffles' appointment to the position of assistant secretary at Penang in 1805. In 1816 an entry appeared in a supplement to *the Biographical Dictionary of the Living Authors of Great Britain and Ireland* asserting that "Mr. Raffles went out to India in an inferior capacity, through the interest of Mr. Ramsay, Secretary to the Company, and in consequence of his marrying a lady connected with that gentleman" (Boulger 1897/1973, 8). As soon as Raffles learnt of this statement he denied it (*ibid.*, 15). Yet H.F. Pearson considered the refutation "totally unconvincing" (Pearson 1957, 15). Pearson suggested that Ramsay bribed Raffles with a promotion to the other side of the world so that he could be relieved of a mistress who had become boring and importunate. As Pearson put it, comparing Olivia to a colonised territory, "A woman and an island, both beautiful, gave Raffles his opportunity" (*ibid.*, 14).

These various liaisons were supposed to have occurred before Olivia met Raffles, though the last, it was claimed, helped Raffles to obtain the first major advance in his career. It is notable that in every case the evidence was flimsy indeed upon which historians speculated about Olivia's sexual involvements. Rumour, innuendo and imagination served where evidence was lacking.

Despite Olivia's marriage to Raffles, historians have also speculated about her subsequent emotional attachments and their consequences for Raffles' career. While in Penang Olivia is said to have captured the affections of John Leyden, medical doctor, scholar and poet, who was befriended by Raffles and his wife when he took

leave from India for a rest cure in supposedly salubrious Penang. Olivia nursed Leyden for nearly three months and after his return to India they corresponded regularly, exchanging poetry. Historians have claimed that Leyden fell in love with her (Wurtzburg 1954, 38), and that when they met again in 1811 during preparations for the assault on Java, his "passion for her...was still as strong as ever" (Johnson 1973, xv, xviii).

With Lord Minto, the governor-general of Bengal from 1807 to 1813, Olivia also developed a close relationship. Minto met Olivia at Melaka and they spent time together in Java following the British conquest. After his departure from Java, Olivia corresponded with him. In one of only two extant letters written by her (the other was to Leyden), Olivia wrote in affectionate terms:

how is it possible for my untutored pen to convey to you the true feelings of my heart. I am sadly deficient in words and therefore can only assure you in the simple language of the heart that it throbs with affection as dear and as tender for you as ever a child's did for a father - you my Lord gave me a right to call you so, when at Malacca you desired me to consider myself as your Daughter, *happy me*, and this right, this dear right I will only resign with my last breath.⁷

For his part, Minto expressed admiration for Raffles' "great lady, with dark eyes, lively manner, accomplished and clever" (quoted in Boulger 1897/1973, 11). Historians have gone on to speculate that Minto's attraction to Olivia enhanced Raffles' upward mobility in the East India Company's service.

An image was thus constructed of Olivia, a composite of dark beauty, flashing eyes, passionate vitality and replete sexual history. However, it seems that this meretricious image threatened to overflow her ancillary role in the Raffles story of imperialist over-achievement. It was difficult to reconcile with her position as Raffles' wife, at least in any way that left Raffles' authority intact. For this reason, it would seem, historians added various qualifications to the picture, which effectively contained and domesticated Olivia's role.

Some historians felt the need to qualify the picture of Olivia as a woman of exotic allure by referring to her advanced age. The idea was that at thirty-three a woman might show the remains of former glory, but could hardly be portrayed unequivocally as a beauty. Hahn conceded Olivia's good looks, but added a waspish allusion to her age: "People said she was handsome, but as she was now thirty-three they probably spoke of her as a *passée* beauty, definitely out of the running" (Hahn 1946, 29-30). Bastin also introduced Olivia ambivalently: "By all accounts she was a woman of

high spirits and striking appearance, though by the time of her marriage to Raffles she was passed [sic] her best" (Bastin 1969, 7-8). Invariably historians considered it necessary to evaluate her appearance. Without exception Olivia emerged favourably from these physical assessments, but because of her age historical approbation was not whole-hearted.

Stories of Olivia's romantic or sexual relationships with Raffles' colleagues and friends had the potential to undermine the sense of Raffles' authority in his own household. An image of Raffles as cuckold was hardly compatible with that of a great empire-builder. Thus historians stressed that Raffles was aware of and approved of Olivia's relationships with Leyden and Minto; that these signs of Olivia's attractiveness augmented rather than undermined the prestige of her husband; and that Raffles' career benefited directly from them.

It was said, for instance, that Raffles was gratified by Leyden's attentions to his wife, as reflecting well on himself: "he accepted the romance as a compliment" (Johnson 1973, xv; Wurtzburg 1954, 38). After Olivia's sudden death in 1814, Raffles had her buried near Leyden's grave in Batavia. Raffles placed on a cenotaph erected for her at Buitenzorg, near Batavia, words that Olivia had composed for Leyden in 1808:

Oh thou whom ne'er my constant heart
One moment hath forgot
Tho' fate severe hath bid us part
Yet still forget me not (Wurtzburg 1954, 66-67).

These events have provoked much historical comment. Adrian Johnson remarked: "Raffles now inscribed these words as if they were addressed by him to her, asking her not to forget Raffles now that she was gone to rejoin Leyden. What was the real relationship between these three is not clear; certainly it was intense between Olivia and Leyden and clearly it was not discouraged by Raffles" (Johnson 1973, xx). By including Raffles in it, the disruptive potential of Olivia's relationship with Leyden was contained. "Three months in Penang under Raffles' roof welded them all together in a friendship that was passionate and lifelong", according to Cross (1921, 47).

The significance of this menage for Raffles' career was emphasised by Raffles' biographers. After Leyden returned to India from Penang, his fortunes improved markedly. Frequent contact with Lord Minto, governor-general of Bengal and a fellow Scot, gave Leyden opportunities to draw Raffles' merits to official attention. Bastin commented: "Raffles' subsequent preferment by Minto owed much to the support of Leyden...who was an intimate of the Governor-General".⁸ Historians have also claimed that Olivia's warm relationship and correspondence with Lord Minto

helped to cement Raffles' ties with his great patron. As Raffles himself acknowledged, Minto's patronage was to be the basis of his later career, giving him the chance to take a leading role in the British conquest of Java and to make his reputation as lieutenant governor of the island during the short-lived British occupation from 1811 to 1816.

Olivia's supposed extramarital relationships drew censure from some historians. Others assessed her putative love life more positively, as providing proof of her attractiveness; thus as justifying Raffles' choice of her as a wife and ornamental appendage to his prestige; and, most importantly, as contributing to his rapid career advancement. Olivia's sexuality was thus shown as an effective adjunct to her husband's career, and in that sense domesticated.

The historical representation of Olivia was also shaped by another set of discursive influences. Another side of her image as Raffles' wife was that of supportive helpmeet. In constructing this image, historians have drawn largely on the work of Abdullah bin Abdul Kadir in his *Hikayat Abdullah*. The most detailed contemporary description of Olivia came not from a European pen but from this indigenous linguist of mixed ancestry, who was well-acquainted with the Raffles household during their stay in Melaka prior to the invasion of Java. Abdullah's comments on Olivia have frequently been quoted by historians in support of a picture of her as Raffles' assistant in his life's work.

Abdullah had a great admiration for most things English, and certainly for Raffles and for Olivia:

I noticed that the character of Mr. Raffles' wife was unlike that of ordinary women. She shared her husband's charm, the modesty and prudence in everything that she did...She enjoyed making a thorough study of Malay, and used to ask how the Malays say this and that. All the points that she noted she wrote down on paper. And I observed too that whenever Mr. Raffles wanted to do something, for instance to make a purchase, he always asked his wife first and if she agreed he acted. It was her nature, I noticed, to do all her work with the greatest alacrity, never wasting a moment in idleness, but forever working away at one thing or another (Abdullah 1970, 80).

Abdullah then criticised the laziness and conceit of Malay women married to men of high standing, contrasting them with Olivia's industry and helpfulness.

Abdullah's important contribution to the development of liberal political thought in Malaya has already been recognised, most recently in Anthony Milner's *The Invention of Politics in Colonial Malaya* (1995). And indeed the value Abdullah places in the above description of Olivia on industriousness, studiousness and language learning is consistent with his general political programme (Milner 1995, ch.2). What has not yet been recognised is Abdullah's contribution to attempts to reconstruct gender relations in Malaya, an important aspect of politics conspicuously absent in existing analyses of the nature and development of Malayan political thought, including Milner's.

Just as Abdullah held up admirable images of British men for the Malays to emulate, he also intended to make over Malay women in the image of British women. His portrait of Olivia reflected this purpose. Abdullah also wanted relations between the sexes among the Malays to move closer to what he saw as the British model. Just as subjects should, in Abdullah's view, become more equal to their rajas than they had been in the hierarchical traditional Malay polity, so should women become more equal to their husbands, though always in an ancilliary capacity. Like British women, Malay women should be industrious supporters of their husbands, competent advisors, effective but subordinate junior partners. According to Abdullah, this role as active helpmeets to their husbands would legitimate a higher status for women within the household.

I noticed that Mrs. Raffles was as active as the cockroach which has no tail, doing one thing after another; after tidying the house she would sew and after sewing she would write letters...As I saw it, it was her character and industry that fitted her to do her husband's work and to be his helper. For Allah joined together the pair of them making them of one mind, like a ruler and his minister, like a ring and the jewel set in it, like sugar in milk (Abdullah 1970, 81).

Such glowing descriptions of Olivia and of her relationship with Raffles had a strategic purpose within Abdullah's liberal project to reform Malay society. Abdullah clearly recognised that the transformation of gender relations was an integral part of any programme of social reconstruction.

As a rehearsal of the rationale for colonial rule, conveniently from the pen of one of the colonised, Abdullah's pictures of British dynamism and progressiveness as opposed to Malay torpidity proved especially attractive to generations of imperialist historians. On the basis of Abdullah's portrait, Olivia, like Raffles, could be shown as conforming to all the requirements of the European work ethic. Abdullah's observations about Olivia's restless productive activity and her support for Raffles'

work were repeatedly used by historians to paint her in the role of active and effective helpmeet.

Another historical portrayal of Olivia emphasised a different aspect of her wifely role of helpmeet: as a conduit for her husband's emotional expression. This drew upon and domesticated the image of Olivia as a woman of passion and high emotionality. An account of Raffles' character by William Cross included a depiction of the crisis in Raffles' career when he learned of charges laid against his administration in Java by his rival, General Robert Gillespie. Cross claimed to have based his "dramatic scene" partly on eye-witness accounts, partly on private correspondence and partly on sympathetic imagination. Cross wrote more than a hundred years after the event and there is little written evidence on which he could have based his account, so imagination must have been the dominant ingredient.

When he received the news, Raffles is supposed to have felt faint and headachy, but to have put a brave face on it. Olivia was not deceived; she knew intuitively that something was wrong. When she read the papers she was furious, screwing them up and stamping her feet on them. Cross continues the scene:

The wave of indignation had spent itself as suddenly as it had risen, collapsing into womanly weeping. For a time the room was perfectly still, save for the convulsive beating of her sobs. When she recollected herself he was saying, "That's better, my dear. You are a good wife to me. You have helped me and cleared my brain by exploding rage for me. Now I can write my reply clearly. See, I will get pen and paper and write it here. We shall write it together, and slay this viper of slander before we go to bed. Then we shall both feel better in the morning" (Cross 1921, 44-5).

Thus Cross imagines Olivia as wife and helper, doing the emotional work of the relationship. In a time of crisis, Olivia allows her husband to vent, vicariously, troubling emotions he was unable to express, a function represented as an integral part of a wife's supportive role. Emotion discharged, Raffles could then go on calmly and rationally with the task before him. Dramatically, Olivia provides a means of showing Raffles' emotional reactions, direct expression of which would have undercut his stature as firm hero of the piece.

Most of the historians who have written on Raffles have offered an assessment of Olivia's success as a wife. Raffles himself provided little comment on the subject. His correspondence shows that he was deeply distressed by Olivia's death in 1814. Leaving Java more than a year later, Raffles referred to her when farewelling his staff: "You have been with me in the days of happiness and joy - in the hours that

were beguiled away under the enchanting spell of one, of whom the recollection awakens feelings which I cannot suppress" (Hahn 1946, 322). He commented more tersely in 1819 that his marriage to her had given him "domestic enjoyment and thus contributed to my happiness" (Boulger 1897/1973, 15). Raffles' own remarks thus correspond to a twin-sided image of Olivia: as mysterious enchantress, and as domestic helpmeet. Historians have evaluated Olivia almost exclusively in terms of her role as Raffles' wife. Like the others, Pearson judged her to have made a success of it: "With her charming manners, her lively grace, she was a fit wife for her brilliant husband, always beside him, loyal and ready with her womanly companionship, which she knew he needed" (Pearson 1957, 23).

CONSTRUCTING SOPHIA

Unlike Olivia Devenish, Sophia Hull had no experience of Asia before she married Raffles in February 1817, but there were already strong family links with the region. Her grand-uncle on her father's side, Commodore James Watson, had been superintendent of the Bombay Marine. Her uncle on her mother's side, William Hollamby, had served as quartermaster under Captain James Cook during Cook's third Pacific voyage in 1776-80. Her father, James Watson Hull, worked in India for eight years from 1777 to 1785 as a clerk and merchant in the East India Company. He married her mother, Sophia Hollamby, in Bombay in 1783. Shortly after the birth of their first child, the couple severed their Indian connections and returned to England. Sophia, their second child, was born in London in 1786 (Bastin 1991, vii). In 1815 Mary, Sophia's younger sister (Bastin notes that she was by "all accounts...the most beautiful of the Hull sisters" (*ibid.*, xvi)) married Peter Auber, an employee of the East India Company who became its secretary in 1829; two of Auber's brothers had military careers in India, while a third, Henry, joined the marine service of the East India Company. One of Sophia's brothers held an official post with the company at Calcutta. Sophia Hull met Raffles in England in 1816 and they married the following year. It was common for British colonisers to marry women with family connections to empire. Henry Auber, Sophia's brother-in-law, was put in command of the *Lady Raffles*, a new company ship named as a compliment to Sophia, in which she and Raffles sailed to Sumatra in 1817-18 (*ibid.*, xvi-xvii).

Compared to Olivia's obscure background, more is known of Sophia's family origins, which were respectably middle-class. But though respectable, Sophia's family made no social pretensions. Raffles wrote frankly of his decision to marry for the second time: "neither Rank fortune or beauty have had weight on the occasion".⁹

Sophia's physical attractiveness, or more often the lack of it, has been much discussed by historians. Thirty-one years old when she married Raffles, Sophia like Olivia was

open to adverse comment on account of her advanced years. Pearson disparaged both her looks and her age:

To call her marriageable is an exaggeration, for she was over thirty and so getting close to the border line where she would become an old maid. Moreover, though she had a good figure, she was by no means good-looking (Pearson 1957, 56).

In the Introduction to the latest reprint of her *Memoir* of Raffles, Bastin addressed the beauty issue directly:

When she met Raffles she was thirty years of age, and therefore well past the normal age of marriage. She was no beauty, although a miniature portrait of her...shows her to have been possessed of many appealing attractions, including a delicate, sensitive face, a long elegant nose, eyes of pale brown, and chestnut coloured hair curled in ringlets across her forehead (Bastin 1991, vii).

Hahn referred depreciatingly to Sophia's "neutral, quiet colors" (Hahn 1946, 509).

Furthermore, as a helpmeet, Sophia had the disadvantage of being identified as "delicate". Among others, her physician, Dr Joseph Arnold, frequently described her as such. She was subject to fainting fits and suffered dreadfully from sea-sickness, which was a serious handicap in an era when sailing ship was the most common form of transport. Unlike Olivia, Sophia was not represented by historians as active or productive, although she was attributed with a compensatory devotion to her husband.

Sophia's "delicate" constitution, however, stood her in good stead in life, if not in literature. Despite sea-sickness, Sophia sailed with her new husband from England to Sumatra, enduring a prolonged voyage of five months duration with no port of call, and near the end of it giving birth to her first child. Along with Raffles she undertook, when pregnant, walking expeditions through the jungles of Sumatra, sometimes covering up to thirty miles a day and sleeping outdoors in unpleasant conditions. Facing agonizing sea-sickness, sometimes during pregnancy, she insisted on accompanying Raffles on many of his sea voyages throughout the region. Four of her five children died of fever in Southeast Asia, Sophia coping with both her great grief and her own serious illnesses. As well as the illnesses she also survived the treatments, which included application of leeches, blistering, repeated immersion in hot baths and heavy doses of laudanum. After returning to England she lost her husband and later her one remaining child, who died at age nineteen. The "delicate" Sophia outlived all her family, going on to the age of seventy-two.

Although Sophia has seldom been portrayed as an active helpmeet to her husband during his life, she is credited with having an immense impact on his subsequent reputation through her publication in 1830 of *the Memoir of the Life and Public Services of Sir Thomas Stamford Raffles*. In his Introduction to the latest (1991) edition of the *Memoir*, Bastin paid tribute to Sophia's achievement in creating Raffles' public image. Bastin pointed out that "in his own day he was not widely known", whereas Sophia's *Memoir* "at once established his public reputation as one of the most liberal and enlightened of all British governors in the East". The book secured this high repute, not only among contemporaries but also with posterity. Bastin emphasised that "The historical reputation of Sir Thomas Stamford Bingley Raffles owes more to his second wife, Sophia Raffles, than to any other person", although he does add that this is partly because of the poor quality of other biographies (Bastin 1991, v-vi). Even Syed Hussein Alatas, who severely criticised Raffles' public career, castigating him as "philosophically and ethically a dwarf" (Alatas 1971, 51), acknowledged the pervasive influence of Sophia's eulogy of her husband's character: "The danger is to consider Raffles as the great humanitarian reformer worthy of respect and adulation, as his widow wanted us to believe. British writers on Raffles have never entirely escaped the influence of his widow's portrayal of her husband" (*ibid.*, 39).

As well as editing her husband's letters to make them read better, without alerting the reader to her re-touching, Sophia was careful in her selection of material, always putting Raffles in the best light. For instance, she left out portions of one of his public addresses expressing support for the notorious Alexander Hare.¹⁰ Through wifely devotion and literary effort, Sophia provided Raffles with a forum in which to convey some of the more attractive elements of his character, which aroused the widespread public admiration on which his historical reputation was built. Sophia provided the vehicle by which his private letters, in which he expressed his ideas, feelings, beliefs and intentions, became public property; by judicious selection and omission of material, and by occasional editing of his words, she moulded his public image. In the process she also helped to create an image of herself as his first devoted and self-abnegating disciple, indeed the first Raffles historian.

Despite their heavy reliance upon the *Memoir* as a source of material on Raffles, and despite the great influence which Sophia exerted on all subsequent interpretations of Raffles, historians have generally given her little credit for her editorial and literary achievement. C.A. Gibson-Hill, for instance, criticised Sophia for editorial bias, and belittled both her intellect and judgment:

Unindicated omissions seem to have been her standard method for dealing with difficulties. The little cockle of her mind, irrevocably at

sea, storm-tossed on an ocean of deep damp devotion, must have carried the distress signal permanently fluttering at the mast-head, while she compiled the Memoir. All worship is agony, and how much so for her: yet according to Capt. H.F. Pearson, her correspondence to Raffles' sister, Mary Anne, as preserved at Aviemore, shows that she could write as a bright and intelligent person, when running free (Gibson-Hill 1955, 191).

Although a woman's devotion to her husband was worthy of praise within its proper sphere, in Gibson-Hill's view it barred her from aspirations to literary authority.

Another recurrent criticism of the *Memoir* is that Sophia almost entirely ignored Olivia's existence, with the exception of one footnote which sets out, incorrectly, the geographical origins of Olivia's first husband. When preparing the manuscript, Sophia repeatedly lamented her ignorance of Raffles' life before she met him; moreover, she was always at pains to abstract even herself almost entirely from the account of her husband's public career (for which she has also been criticised). But historians have not hesitated to impute dark motives and to comment adversely on her silence about Olivia. Thus Boulger wrote: "Lady Raffles, the second wife, with the exception of a single brief footnote, and that erroneous, carefully eliminated in the *Memoir*...everything referring to her predecessor...[a] studied and ostentatious omission, due to petty but intelligible motives" (Boulger 1897/1973, 8). Donald Davies referred to this as Sophia's "one womanly failing" (Davies 1957, 107). Hahn was even more pointed: Sophia "never forgave her predecessor...for having existed", and "maintained an icy silence on the subject of her predecessor...an inexcusable display of jealous spite" (Hahn 1946, 59, 109).

Sophia's success as a wife, like Olivia's, has been judged by historians, but again the evidence on which they based their assessments was meagre. As with Olivia, Raffles himself showed nineteenth century reticence in writing about Sophia, although he wrote adoringly of their children. After the deaths of all but one of the children, and the loss of most of his possessions and scientific collections in a shipboard fire, he wrote from Singapore:

I assure you I stand much in need of advice and were it not for Lady Raffles I should have no counsellor at all. She is nevertheless a host to me, and if I do live to see you again, it will be entirely owing to her love and affection. Without this I should have been cast away long ago (Wurtzburg 1897/1973, 607).

No similar comment occurs in the rest of Raffles' voluminous correspondence. On this slim foundation historians have not hesitated to judge her as a wife. Pearson wrote that although she had "so little to commend her when she married", she "developed, always faithful, from a maid in love to a mature and devoted woman" (Pearson 1957, 89). Wurtzburg summed up Sophia's contribution to Raffles' career:

she proved a devoted wife; she feared no risk and shirked no hardship to keep by her husband's side. Without her loving care he might never have won through to the days that made his fame (Wurtzburg 1897/1973, 415).

Bastin concluded that "What she lacked in looks she made up in strength of character, and in single-minded devotion to her husband" (Bastin 1969, 415).

CONCLUSION

In recent years studies have been made of the historical roles of European women in several areas of Southeast Asia, including Java (eg. Taylor 1983), Sumatra (eg. Stoler 1991), and the Philippines (Doran 1993). With few exceptions (eg. Brownfoot 1984), the contributions and experiences of colonial women in the British colonies of the Malay region have been comparatively neglected. Of the many British women who lived in Southeast Asia in the early nineteenth century, Olivia Devenish and Sophia Hull have attracted unusual interest from historians because they were the wives of Stamford Raffles. The purpose of this paper has been to review and analyse historical commentary regarding these two women.

Over a period of about a hundred years the preoccupations of historians with respect to these women changed little. The criteria on which they were evaluated, revolving around beauty and attractiveness and the functions of a helpmeet, have been very narrow, and the assessments sometimes harsh. Olivia has been given most credit for her beauty, Sophia for her devotion. Often historians drew sharp contrasts between the two, Bastin, for example, describing Sophia as a woman "who in temperament and appearance was the opposite of his first wife" (Bastin 1969, 12). Lack of evidence has not restrained historians from imaginative construction, speculation and judgment.

Significantly, the ways in which the two women have been portrayed and the contrasts drawn between them reflected a prevalent tendency to categorise women stereotypically as madonnas or whores - a tendency to which Freudian feminist theory has drawn attention. With her homely looks, "delicacy", devotion to her husband, and ample fertility, Sophia easily met the criteria of the madonna stereotype. Olivia's

gypsy-style "Latin" looks and scandalous reputation more readily fitted images of whoredom. Simple categorisation as a whore, however, did not sit well with her role as Raffles' wife. To meet the discursive requirements of imperialist biography, modification and domestication of Olivia's meretricious image was necessary. This produced a twin-sided, ambivalent representation, the ambiguity of which accounts in large part for the air of mystery which continues to surround Olivia Devenish. To date, historical writing on Raffles' wives has revealed more about the mental constructs and gendered perspectives of historians than about the characters of Olivia and Sophia. The myths thus created need to be dispelled if the history of European women during the British colonial period in Southeast Asia is ever to be written.

NOTES:

- ¹ Two notable exceptions are Butcher 1979 and Manderson 1997.
- ² See e.g., Tarling 1992. In 645 pages of text, European women are mentioned on three pages.90
- ³ Freud 1924, 210. Freud's analysis focused on male developmental obstacles, though he speculated that analogous processes might be at work within the female psyche.
- ⁴ For a useful brief biography of Raffles, see Bastin 1969, 7-14.
- ⁵ The cause of Murray's hostility was almost certainly envy aroused by the rapid advancement of Raffles' career.
- ⁶ For details of such rumours, see *Memoirs of Major-General Thomas Murray, 1836*, Oriental and India Office Collection, British Library, B409/4.
- ⁷ Olivia Raffles to Lord Minto, 28 January 1812 in Bastin 1969, illus. no.8.
- ⁸ Bastin 1969, 8. See also Pearson 1957, 30-31; Clair 1963, 13.
- ⁹ Raffles to Rev. Dr Thomas Raffles, 23 February 1817, quoted in Bastin 1991, p.vii.
- ¹⁰ Hare and Raffles were involved in a scheme to transport convicts and forcefully deport other labourers, mainly women, to provide a labour force for Hare's settlement at Banjarmasin in Borneo (Alatas 1971, 36-8). Hare also gained notoriety for keeping a large harem on Cocos Island (see Hughes 1950, 26-39).

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