Missing in Action: The Strange Case of Imperial Autobiography

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In their recent *Reading Autobiography*, Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson provide a succinct and persuasive historiography of autobiography criticism over the past half-century. Early approaches to the subject, Smith and Watson argue, emphasized the transparency and representativeness of individual autobiographical texts, and aimed to construct a canon of life-writing. A second wave of critics and theorists, exemplified by Karl Weintraub and Georges Gusdorf, were more conscious that autobiography was a matter of construction of self through narrative, rather than a simple transcription of the past; such criticism, nonetheless, was informed by “an ideology of . . . autonomous selfhood” which in turn influenced “the texts privileged and the practices of self-creation valued” (128). Now a third wave of autobiography criticism challenges “the concept of a unified, sovereign subject” which founds “Western” narratives of progress and reason. If the “unitary self of liberal humanism” still has power in a new millennium, Smith and Watson suggest, it is increasingly being challenged by non-Western narratives which resist, which emphasize different kinds of subjectivity—performative, community-based, or flexible selves (135). This new wave of autobiography criticism, then, drawing upon the apparatus of contemporary literary theory--in particular poststructuralist, postcolonial, and feminist readings--is very much in line with a concomitant expansion in practices of life-writing.

As persuasive as this reading is, it contains assumptions that need to be challenged. Most non-Western life-writing in the last century has engaged with narratives of progress and reason as much as “Western” writing has, attempting to explore the possibility of cultural autonomy within modernity. It has thus followed paths in which unitary subjecthood on the one hand, and community, performativity and
hybridity on the other do not automatically fall into easy opposition in the manner which 
Smith and Watson suggest. In my own work on national autobiography in the colonial 
world, for example, I have discovered “resistance” to be highly problematic: a 
revolutionary autobiography which is an “out-law genre” under a colonial regime may 
seek to incite a unitary subjectivity for citizens of the nation-to-be.¹ Colonialism 
prefigures and interrogates the “global” which Smith and Watson celebrate as a 
contemporary phenomenon: who, after all, might have a more flexible selfhood than an 
indentured labourer, who might be more performative than a member of a colonial 
comprador class?² Jawaharlal Nehru and Kwame Nkrumah attempt in their 
autobiographies, one might argue, to create unitary national subjects in opposition to 
colonialism’s discredited appeal to community: British manipulation of communalism in 
India, its indirect rule through traditional chiefs in the Gold Coast. Selves which 
acknowledge community may thus not automatically be emancipatory; flexibility and 
performativity may at times be a matter of reluctant participation, rather than celebration.

If we go further, more wrinkles become apparent in the assumptions about the 
history of autobiography itself which underlie Smith and Watson’s critical 
historiography. The manner in which Lyotard’s “grand narratives” to which Smith and 
Watson refer come to reside in individual texts is complex: it is not simply a question of 
“readerly” realist texts mimicking these narratives in miniature, and postmodern and 
other “writerly” texts challenging them through a series of micropractices.³ If there is a 
close connection between conventional autobiography which stresses unitary subjecthood 
and Lyotard’s Western grand narratives, then one would expect the autobiographies of 
imperial proconsuls--British colonial governors, governors-general and viceroys--to be
prototypical autobiography, occupying a nexus at which many of the narratives which are
now contested coincide. In the figure of the imperial proconsul a variety of unitary selves
coincide: a racial self, a gendered male self, a rational self committed--although
contradictorily, we shall see--to a grand narrative of the spread of reason. Yet no imperial
proconsul produced an autobiography, and their life-writing was transmuted into other
genres--travel writing, testaments, thin fictionalizations. Closer discussion of such
autobiographical efforts and failures, I wish to argue, has much to tell us about
imperialism and colonialism, but may also paradoxically cause us to reconsider our own
practices in reading contemporary “Western” and “non-Western” autobiography, and
indeed cause us to question such terminology.

The discursive association between imperialism and large cultural narratives of
development and progress towards reason in the late nineteenth and early twentieth
century is well documented. Intellectual justifications of colonial rule from the 1850s
onwards had to negotiate with the uncomfortable fact that notions of individual rights and
autonomy that were fundamental to political reforms in Europe and North America in the
nineteenth century were not extended to the colonies. While casual and institutional
racism were common in colonial governance, theoretical elaborations of colonialism
tended to eschew an absolute endorsement of racial difference for a stress on tutelage
under which the colonized would move at a glacial pace towards autonomy. Frederick
Lugard was candid on this point in his study The Dual Mandate, which influenced a
generation of colonial civil servants:
As Roman imperialism laid the foundations of modern civilization, and led the wild barbarians of these islands along the path to progress, so in Africa to-day we are repaying the debt, and bringing to the dark places of the earth, the abode of barbarism and cruelty, the torch of culture and progress, while ministering to the material needs of our own civilization. (618)

British colonialism in Africa might in part be motivated by a civilizing mission, but Lugard’s last clause is significant—colonial rule was “for the mutual benefit of her own industrial classes, and of the native races in their progress to a higher plane” (617): if it enabled the “development” of Africa, it also crucially enabled the continued advancement of the narrative of European civilization.

The British empire, as many commentators have noted, was represented discursively not only as a rational but also as a masculine space. Martin Green has noted the close association between the growth of Britain’s empire and its representation in adventure fiction with a male protagonist. Crusoe’s prudence and frugality is replaced in late nineteenth century texts with figures such as Kim O’Hara, Captain Lingard or Alan Quatermain, who engage in deeds of masculine self-assertion on a vanishing frontier (20). English masculinity, Mrilani Sinha has observed, was increasingly constituted in opposition to other racial masculinities, ranging from the martial Sikh to the effeminate Bengali (10). Central to this process was the reinvention of the English gentleman from an aristocratic to a bourgeois figure, from a landed property owner to the possessor of moral qualities which distinguished late Victorian masculinity: rationality, emotional continence, somatic control. Indeed the notion of the gentleman effectively addressed a potential crisis in late Victorian and Edwardian masculinity. Victorian masculinity was
often represented in terms of the technological control over powerful natural forces: for
the Victorian middle classes, true “manliness” was frequently represented metaphorically
through the manner in which industrial technology managed “the natural energy of water
and fire” (Sussman 11). From the late nineteenth-century onwards, however, the fear of
degeneration brought about by increasing urbanisation threatened the notion of a vital
male energy. The notion of the gentleman appealed to a feudal, pre-capitalist “natural
order” in opposition to degeneration, while at the same time the series of disciplinary
techniques it incited embedded capitalism within the micropractices of individual lives.

Colonial civil servants, Anthony Kirk-Greene has recently argued, could be seen
as the epitome of this Victorian and Edwardian bourgeois masculine ethos. Unlike
diplomatic and military posts, positions in the Indian Civil Service and the Colonial
Administrative Service did not require private wealth. They thus appealed to a generation
of bourgeois gentlemen who were the products of public school: the positions attracted
men whose class position came not from landed family, but emerged out of “class
formation, of elitist moulding,” the products “not of birth but of nurturing” (9). As Kirk-
Greene notes, such an insight resonates with Peter Cain and Anthony Hopkins’ notion of
a “gentlemanly order” of gentleman capitalists as the motor for empire (11). Imperial
proconsuls epitomized such an order.

The so-called imperial proconsuls did not usually emerge from one of the colonial
civil services. Many were politicians--frequently from landed gentry families--or military
men (Kirk-Greene 212), but they came to share the ethos of the civil services which they
came to head. If we take at random four prominent names from the late nineteenth and
early twentieth centuries—Cecil Rhodes, Nathaniel Curzon, Lugard, and Hugh Clifford--
we can distinguish a clear pattern to their lives which is expressive of some of the central
tenets of gentlemanliness within imperial development. Manly adventures on the frontier
of the kind that would excite the readers of whom Green writes were followed by a more
sedentary administrative career. While they had philosophical differences--Clifford, for
instance, was much more ambivalent about large-scale capitalist colonial development
than Rhodes--all four men shared a commitment to an imperial vision, an acceptance of
racialist ideologies, and a deep investment in ideals of character and discipline which
were central to Victorian and Edwardian notions of manliness.

As its various subsequent fictionalised and biographical representations have
shown, the life of Cecil Rhodes is particularly suitable for narrativisation. Rhodes
perhaps represented imperialism at its most naked: he rose in twenty brief years from
subsistence cotton-farming in Natal to the position of prime minister of Cape Colony
while simultaneously gaining control over the world diamond trade. The imperialist and
industrialist’s crude beliefs in racial superiority appealed to populist imperial sentiments
among European populations in Southern Africa and in Britain: of all Britain’s colonial
legacies, his was perhaps the most difficult to undo. His life, commencing with frontier
adventure and ending not long after he overreached himself in sponsoring the Jameson
Raid, would fit into the grand narratives of progressivism, martial male homosociality,
and the expansion of empire with which Smith implicitly associates autobiography. At
the same time, Rhodes’ belief in his imperial mission was matched by brooding
introspection induced by an awareness of his own mortality after a heart attack at the age
of nineteen. His ownership and manipulation of the press in Cape Colony showed a clear
appreciation of the power of print media, and he found time to write influential
formulations of imperialism which drew upon his own experience, most notably his much-revised *Last Will and Testament*. Yet he did not write an autobiography.

Frederick Lugard, perhaps to a greater extent even than Rhodes, would seem a likely candidate to for autobiographical self-representation. The imperial proconsul’s early military career in India, passionate love affair, and subsequent adventures in East Africa would seem to be fertile material for life writing. Lugard’s career was supplemented by periods in colonial administration up to his final, and most prestigious posting as Governor-General of Nigeria from 1914-1919. The contrast between what his biographer Margery Perham called the “years of adventure” and those of authority would seem to be an ideal spur for the retrospective construction of a Philippe Lejeune’s “double subject” of autobiography, split between past protagonist and present narrator (214). Lugard was, like Rhodes, a prolific writer, and produced substantial studies from *The Rise of Our East African Empire* in 1893 and the influential *The Dual Mandate* in 1922 that, as we have seen, embedded imperialism and colonialism within an Enlightenment narrative of progress towards reason. Married for the latter part of his career to the journalist and writer Flora Shaw, the imperial administrator was aware, again like Rhodes, of the power of print media, and in his long retirement of a quarter century from colonial service he continued to write voluminously on colonial affairs. In the last years of his life, however, the autobiographical impulse was still absent, and he spent much time fruitlessly revising *The Dual Mandate* to fit a much changed world (Perham, 1960: 700-701).

To the cases of Lugard and Rhodes, we can add a third failed autobiographer. George Nathaniel Curzon’s life was split between youthful deeds on the frontier and a
later, more sober, political career. From 1898 to 1905, Curzon was Viceroy of India, occupying the most prestigious of proconsular positions. Again, we have a published writer, already the author of travel narratives and non-narrative reflections of empire, who feels that his life story personally embodies the narrative of imperialism. In Curzon’s case an almost religious identification with the imperial mission was enhanced by the strange coincidence that Government House in Calcutta was apparently modeled after Kedleston Hall, his ancestral seat (Goradia 24). As in the case of Lugard and Rhodes, Curzon showed the retrospective impulse common to autobiographers. Indeed, he went further than the two other imperial proconsuls in that he wrote a series of autobiographical notes, apparently for the use of a biographer (Goradia 48-49), which attempt to reconstruct and reinterpret his childhood in the light of later experience. Like Lugard, however, Curzon would also need to wait for the attentions of a devoted biographer to produce a coherent narrative of his life as an act of imperial service.\(^5\)

Of the four imperial proconsuls discussed here, Hugh Clifford perhaps came closest to publishing an autobiography. Occupying various administrative positions in Pahang in the last years of the nineteenth century, Clifford produced several novels and collections of short stories and “sketches” of Malay life.\(^6\) He continued his writing career, albeit with a much diminished output, during postings to the Caribbean, West Africa and Ceylon. Letters Clifford wrote to his friend Henry Clodd from Accra when Governor of the Gold Coast reveal that he embarked upon an autobiography, provisionally entitled \textit{The Notebook of a Colonial Civil Servant}.\(^7\) By late 1916, Clifford had produced a manuscript of 90,000 words, which he asked Clodd to comment upon, while stressing that “the book is one which I should never dream of publishing until I have retired from
the Service, for from first to last it contains too many unorthodox opinions, and too many home-truths, about Colonial Administration . . .”8 By the next year, however, the governor had undergone a change of heart. His correspondence with Clodd is unfortunately unrevealing as to motive, but by May 1917 he had decided to abandon the work, while early the following year, in response to an inquiry from Clodd, he noted that “[y]ou ask after my note-book. I have scrapped the whole of the work I did . . .”9

It might, of course, be argued that the publication of any memoirs or autobiographies by public figures was unusual in late Victorian and Edwardian England. Both Curzon and Clifford refer to reticence about political matters as a powerful brake upon the impulse to produce life-writing. Among nineteenth-century British Prime Ministers Salisbury, Rosebery, Gladstone, and Disraeli (despite the latter’s obvious literary talents) failed to publish either autobiographies or memoirs, leaving H.H. Asquith and Arthur Balfour (posthumously) to pioneer the genre in the third decade of the twentieth century. Yet imperial autobiographers surely had more compelling raw material than Asquith’s—epitomised by his memoirs’ title, *Fifty Years in Parliament*—on which to work, especially given the widespread popularity of fiction with imperialist themes discussed above. And autobiographical reticence on the part of imperial proconsuls did not end, as that of Prime Ministers did, in the 1920s: it persisted until after World War II, by which time, in world changed by both improvements in communication technology and incipient anti-colonialism, there were no real proconsuls left.

A more detailed analysis of writings by Curzon and Clifford that have autobiographical elements suggests another reason for the impossibility of coherent imperial autobiography: a fundamental contradiction in the construction of the manly
imperialist as subject, and indeed a series of splits between the narratives of race, gender and rationality which Smith and Watson’s schema would suggest are inseparably fused. Curzon’s two volumes Tales of Travel and the posthumous Leaves from a Viceroy’s Notebook illustrate this. Both volumes consist of a miscellany of texts: a mixture of tales drawn from Curzon’s travels in the mid 1880s and 1890s, and anecdotes from his time as Viceroy of India, supplemented with more factual accounts, such as “The Great Waterfalls of the World,” in which narrator and protagonist “I” are only fitfully present. Curzon’s brief narratives are largely set outside of Europe, they apply a scrupulously rational narrational framework to the incidents they record. Several stories stress the exhaustive observation and then application of inductive logic to understand the world. Thus “The Voice of Memnon” is an exhaustive analysis of how one of the two Colossi of Thebes might have been capable of spontaneously generating sound. Such anecdotes as “The Death-Bed of Sir Henry Lawrence” and “The Billiard Table of Napoleon” show a narrator who notes “the carelessness with which people observe, or rather fail to observe, that which is daily and even hourly under their eyes” (Tales of Travel159). This can be overcome, Curzon as narrator argues, by “accurate observation” which is facilitated by “acquainting oneself, as far as is possible, with the facts of a case or the features of a scene before you come into contact with it” (160). Thus Curzon as protagonist discovers through rational calculation that the plaque showing where Henry Lawrence, one of the British combatants in the 1857 Indian Revolt, died, is misplaced in the Residency in Lucknow—he also tracks down Napoleon’s billiard table in St. Helena through a series of sharp observations. In Leaves from a Viceroy’s Notebook, in contrast, Curzon is contemptuous of the irrationality of Chinese monks in Fujian Province who chant
Sanskrit and Pali sutras transliterated into Chinese characters, manifesting “ignorant repetition of unmeaning sounds” (269)

Curzon’s writings, however, do more than merely create a binary opposition between rational Occidental observer and irrational Oriental landscape. Indeed, most of their affective power is invested in the pleasure of a recollected past of adventure, and its contrast with an overly-rationalised and bureaucratic present. In his introduction to Tales of Travel, Curzon notes that “if in rare moments I seek literary distraction, it is in the perusal of works of travel and exploration that I am certain to find it.” If political events cause too many difficulties, “recreation and repose come stealing in upon me from memories of the past. I am once again in the wilds of Asia, or on the mountain-tops, or amid the majestic monuments of bygone ages. (4) Elaborating on the point, Curzon pictures himself as a “middle-aged and sedentary politician” (5) who can recall tales which belong to a past that is quite dead, not merely by reason of change in my own environment, but also in the revolution in the conditions of travel, or in the state of the peoples and lands which I visited. For instance, in some countries where I rode thousands of weary miles on horseback, the traveler now proceeds rapidly and comfortably by carriage or motor, or even by train” (6).

The paradox here is that the death of the past in which Curzon has so much investment has been brought about by a process of “development” in which he himself has been a prominent agent. Rather than running in parallel, gendered and colonial narratives here diverge, and then become tangled: it is impossible to superimpose one upon another with any congruence.
The contradiction which memory of the past opens up in Curzon’s texts can be illustrated more precisely by looking at Clifford’s autobiographical fragments. I am here interested in the short stories and sketches which arise from Clifford’s early experiences in Pahang in the 1880s. Taking up a cadetship in the Protected Malay States in 1883 at the age of 17, Clifford initially spent three years as private secretary to Hugh Low, Resident of Perak. In 1887 he was dispatched on a mission to Pahang, a state on the more remote east coast of the Malayan Peninsula, in order to begin to bring it under British influence through a treaty requiring the presence of a British agent. After a successful mission, Clifford returned to Pahang, and occupied a variety of official positions, including that of Resident, from 1887-1899. The capital Pekan, and the new administrative centre of the state, Kuala Lipis, rapidly developed into settled colonial outposts. In the administrator’s 1893 diary, it is clear that his life revolved around office work, meetings, and lawn tennis played with other members of the European community. In 1896, while on leave in England, Clifford married, and his wife accompanied him back to Pahang. At this time he also began to write and publish fiction and “sketches,” most of which celebrate his early experiences of the frontier, and few of which describe the daily administrative round.

Clifford’s series of essays and short stories, published in volumes such as *In Court and Kampong* and *Malayan Monochromes*, adopt a complex series of strategies with reference to their status as life-writing. They play with the notion of an “autobiographical pact,” at times acknowledging their status as autobiography, at others resorting to thin—and evidently transparent--strategies of fictionalization. Clifford’s
preface to his third collection, *In a Corner of Asia* in 1899, stresses that the writer has “sacrificed dramatic effects in the cause of truth” and that the descriptions “owe nothing to my imagination,” embodying a “scrupulous fidelity to my models” (vi). However, the stories themselves have a variety of relationships to autobiography, and to Lejeune’s notion of an autobiographical contract which promises “‘identity’ between the names of the author, narrator, and protagonist’” (202). The opening story, “At the Court of Pelesu,” is presented as fiction with a third person narrator and a protagonist called Jack Norris, yet it is a thinly fictionalized account of Clifford’s initial visit to Pahang, the details of which would have been familiar to his initial audience in the Straits Settlements. Another, “A Daughter of the Mohammedans,” is told in the first person by a narrator whom the reader is encouraged to identify with Clifford, even if he is not explicitly named. In other stories, brief parenthetical comments [such as “so men who knew him tell me” (65)] make readers fleetingly aware of a narrator who authorizes a text as something more than a Malay folktale. Rather than creating a unitary subject through a conventionally autobiographical narrative representing in a condensed fashion grand cultural narratives of race, gender, and development, then, these texts seem rather coy about the subject of autobiography.

This reticence, and its connection to the operation of memory we noted in Curzon’s texts earlier, can be best illustrated through the close reading of a single story, “At a Malayan Court.” First published as “His Heart’s Desire” in the author’s first collection, *In Court and Kampong*, the story seems to have been a particular favourite of the author’s and was republished and re-titled in the later collection *The Further Side of
Silence (1916). The plot is vintage Clifford, involving a framing narrative in which a white man “whose name does not matter” (299) is invited in the dead of night to an empty fishing boat which lies beached in a Malayan river. He is met by a young woman, Bedah, and a broken, degenerate man, Awang Itam, whom he has previously known as one of the most handsome of the budak raja, the followers of the “Sultan” of the state. Shocked, he asks why Awang Itam has been reduced to these circumstances. In a separate narrative we now learn that Awang Itam fell in love with Iang Munah, a “temporary” concubine of the Sultan. His childhood companion and immediate chief, Saiyid Usman, at the same time caught the eye of the of the Sultan's daughter, Tungku Uteh. Both men carried on simultaneous affairs, and remained undiscovered until Tungku Uteh capriciously deprived the Saiyid of his dagger, which she placed as a trophy in her bedroom. Unable to revenge himself immediately upon the Saiyid, because of his noble birth, the Sultan thus exacted revenge by torturing his young companion, before having the Saiyid killed on a hunting expedition. Bedah, the woman present on the boat, is the Saiyid’s widow, and has arranged the meeting between Awang Itam and the white man. At the end of the story Awang Itam confesses that his torture does not matter so much to him as the knowledge that Iang Munah has again become a “temporary” concubine of the Sultan.

Clifford’s text represents a complexly mediated retrospective construction of his life in a relation for members of an imagined community of readers. Through Clifford’s official reports, it is possible to reconstruct the discursive position he occupied when in Pahang at the time at which the story is set--since the “white man” is powerless to intervene in the case unfolded in the story, it is clearly set at a time soon after his arrival
in Pahang. Looking at Clifford’s reports preserved in Colonial Office files does not, of course, give us access to an originary “story” of events before the embellishment of discourse. The reports do, however, give us an insight into how a very different situation of writing results in the production of a very different sense of self, a self which cannot easily be reconciled with the self of the later stories.

Contemporary accounts written by Clifford in the early years in Pahang are produced in an official context, and thus stress the need for British colonization. “No government as we shd. understand the word really exists in Pahang,” Clifford wrote in an 1887 report. “There are no Courts of Justice, no Police, no Code of Laws,” continued the agent, repeating stories of oppression “told to me by trustworthy Malays & Chinese” as evidence for the need for active intervention. In particular, Clifford concentrates upon the sexual appetites of Malay rulers as evidence of this lack of government:

The one offence wh. H.H. cannot forgive is his followers having connection with any of the women about his palaces--H.H. sends for[?] every girl, who lives near Pekan, when she comes of age, if she is reported to be pretty, & he then keeps her in his palaces together with his concubines--these girls are not allowed to marry, & are given nothing except their food and clothing. During the day they sometimes return to their relatives, but they are guarded all the time, & are brought back at night. The people complain bitterly of this custom, as their daughters cannot marry, [. . .] & the girls dislike it, as they may not marry, & are subjected to the most fearful tortures if they go wrong with any body -- In a case of this sort the man is almost always killed. No proof is required.
Here Clifford explains the issue of “temporary” concubinage which is central to “His Heart’s Desire,” and, indeed, gives a general context to the story. The relationship between narratives of masculinity and imperialism here seems quite clear. Sultan Ahmad’s failings as a ruler are similar to his failings as a man: both arise from a lack of restraint. In terms of manliness, Ahmad does not show the control of natural forces so crucial to Victorian masculinity; in terms of governance, his state has no legal apparatus to restrain despotism and the abuse of power. Only the intervention of a new, rational order can thus bring Pahang into the modern world. It is significant that when, a few years later, Clifford writes of improvements in Pahang, he again illustrates his account with a discussion of masculine morality. “At the present time,” Clifford writes in his 1893 report, “the rights of the peasant are fully recognised. His wives and children, his land, and the fruits of his labour are at length really his own, and the knowledge that this is so has bred a spirit of independence in him which quells the dread of his superiors which formerly caused him to suffer in silence.” Pahang has rejoined a narrative of progress towards modernity, with sturdy yeoman peasants, now resisting the excesses of feudal rule. Significantly, Clifford’s idealized peasants resemble more the Victorian bourgeois family, secure in its ownership of property and with women occupying the private sphere, than their counterparts in early modern England.

Clifford’s early reports exemplify in embryo what Johannes Fabian has called “allochrony,” a splitting of temporality in representation in which the anthropological subject of the text placed in “another Time” from that of the narrator and the observer and so made amenable to analysis (Time and the Other 143). Pahang is repeatedly compared to medieval Europe, while Clifford himself occupies modern, progressive time. Yet it is
important to emphasize that this split is only embryonic: unlike the anthropological texts and, more recently, travelogues which Fabian has discussed, the split is not or at best is only marginally embedded within the structure of the narrative itself. There is as yet little retrospection in these narratives of the moment. Clifford’s short story, however, written a decade later, is clearly different. Here the framing narrative imposes a clear temporal distinction between the world of the “white man” and that of the Malay Court: the affective power of narrated events is contrasted with the cool detachment of the time of their narration, just as “native fashion” is distinguished from “the white man’s methods” (299-300). Indeed, the transparent pretence of anonymity and the coy transformation of what is clearly still an autobiographical narrative into third person narration serve to enhance this effect. The story acquires an exemplary meaning beyond its immediate environment, the narrator noting that “[w]here and when these things happened does not signify at all,” just as readers are exhorted to “have no concern” about the identity of the protagonists (299). Autobiography here acquires the representativeness which Smith and Watson note as central to the judgment of “second wave” theorists: such a quality enables Clifford’s story to exemplify a larger narrative in which empire, reason, and masculine detachment run as parallel threads.

The discussion above, however, represents only a partial reading of the story. For if the frame narrative introduces separation between “white man” and Malay protagonist, other elements of the text hint at their identity—the “heart’s desire” of the title is not only Awang Itam’s desire for his lover, but the white man’s desire to be a Malay man. Awang Itam, in his memory, has been a “fine-limbed, upstanding youngster, dressed wonderfully in an extravagantly peaked kerchief and brilliant garments of many-coloured silks (303);
he has lived in a world of martial homosociality, under a “code of honour” which cannot refuse any “challenge to his manhood” (310). Awang Itam thus represents a spectacle of medieval chivalry which the gentleman-administrator with which the “white man” identifies—he, too, we are told, has an “appetite for adventure,” and yet his function here is merely to provide an audience to the tale. And while Clifford’s text is circumspect, it is clear to a reader familiar with his works through a series of metaphorical condensations that Awang Itam’s mutilation involves castration. Saiyid Usman, we might remember, is deprived of a phallic dagger by Tunku Uteh which is then placed upon a “tall erection of ornamental pillows” (314). When the nameless white man first sees Awang Itam, he is disgusted at his “air of abject degradation” and the humiliation of its broken manhood”—the pronoun in the second classes indicating that Awag Itam is now not a man, but an “object” (302). When Awang Itam describes the “nameless tortures” inflicted on him to “wreck his manhood,” his listener begins “writhing in sympathetic agony, . . . assailed by a feeling of horror so violent that it turned him sick” (318). Here we have a moment of identification by two men separated only by temporality. Clifford presents the Saiyid’s death on the hunting expedition as heroic, standing on the sandbank defying the Sultan’s men: in reply to Awang Itam’s account oh his mutilation, in contrast, the white man replies that it would be “better far to die than to endure such excruciating pains, and thereafter live the life which is no life” (318). The contrast between the two men’s fates seems to thus represent, in a condensed fashion, the contrast between the time of narration and the time of writing, between heroic deeds of adventure on the frontier and the sedentary, desk-bound life of a colonial administrator, between a past “wild life” and
the present reality of dealing with “vast piles of official correspondence” which Clifford would later describe as “working in chains” (“In Chains” 173).

Clifford’s published texts thus, like Curzon’s, give even as they take away. Even as on one level they introduce a structuring series of binarisms—rationality/irrationality, masculinity/unmanliness, “white man”/native—at another level the affective response produced by the text tends to break this down. Colonial discourse here is here marked by “ambivalence,” to use Homi Bhabha’s phrase (131), but it not so much a universalized psychic condition as a product of particular historical contradictions. Colonialism described itself as a modern form of power, as a kind of Foucauldian “governmentality” in which individual colonial subjects might be incited towards rational self-development (Scott 214) but at the last resort, as Ranajit Guha notes, it was a premodern form of power based on the threat of violence expressed through “the coercive apparatus of the state” (25). Colonialism pictured itself, in Lugard’s terms, as “bringing to the dark places of the earth, the abode of barbarism and cruelty, the torch of culture and progress,” yet in fact, through selective adaptation, set about manufacturing “barbarous” indigenous traditions on an unprecedented scale (Ranger 212). It claimed a tutelary function, yet its inherent “rule of colonial difference” made it despise the products of that tutelage, and deny them advancement (Chatterjee 18). Clifford and Curzon, then, have a profound emotional investment in and identification with imagined properties of the societies which they are committed to “develop” and thus destroy.

It is from these circumstances that the impossibility of imperial autobiography emerges. Second wave theorists and critics of autobiography, as Smith and Watson describe them, identified the emergence of autobiography with the evolution of the
autonomous individual in Western Europe. For Karl Weintraub, then, autobiography emerges in Renaissance Europe as a method of ordering and interpreting personal experiences within a growing awareness of historicity: at its core it is “centred upon an aware self aware of its relation to its experiences” (824) and the world. George Gusdorf also stresses the time of autobiography’s emergence, noting that “the awareness of the singularity of each individual life is the late product of a specific civilization” (29) which only becomes possible when “consciousness of self” exists (30) and “man knows himself as a responsible agent” (31). Like Weintraub, Gusdorf celebrates autobiography as made possible only by historical consciousness—in autobiography, indeed, “the artist and the model coincide, the historian tackles himself as object” (31). Watson and Smith do not so much critique second wave assertions as place them in a larger framework in which their celebratory culturalist rhetoric is questioned. The individual whose arrival Gusdorf and Weintraub celebrate is seen as raced, gendered, and the product of a specific moment of modernity. He (and Gusdorf uses this gender-specific pronoun uncritically) is a waystation, not a terminus, and subject to intense questioning by third-wave theoretical positions and new autobiographies: “[a]round the globe, contesting versions of selfhood are posed, above all, in diverse kinds of life narratives that introduce collective, provisional, and mobile subjects” (135).

 Yet for imperial autobiography the individual’s relationship “history” and “historical consciousness” is not unproblematic. Colonial texts may, as Fabian suggests of anthropology, attempt representation of the colonised by denying “coevalness,” by placing the observer in progressive time and the observed in the cyclical time of the past (“Time and Narration . . .” 4). In the examples we have discussed the observer and the
observed are in effect the same individual, Gusdorf’s “artist and the model,” occupying different, incommensurable times. The manly adventurer identifies with an imagined precolonial culture, while the imperial administrator imposes the strictures of “development” upon this culture: these two positions cannot be reconciled within a narrative of individual development and growth, and a coherent life narrative becomes impossible to sustain. What emerges in imperial life-writing is a series of texts which individually may seem to be readerly, to observe realist conventions, but collectively form a series of mutually contradictory fragments drawing on a variety of fictional and non-fictional genres, with no central explicatory narrative. As a whole, then, each of these efforts by imperial proconsuls to represent their lives begins to look remarkably writerly, “postmodern”: there is in fact no coherent narrational principle to hold the life together. It would be left to anticcolonial leaders to appropriate the project of modernity: Jawaharlal Nehru, Kwame Nkrumah, and Kenneth Kaunda were all able to write autobiographies which aligned an individual life with the grand narrative of the nation about to be born. In these narratives the crooked is made straight, the past reclaimed as part of a narrative interrupted by colonialism. The individual’s story of personal growth is “a remarkable personal fusion of what was initially given, what his world brings to him [sic], what he selects from this, how he builds this into his makeup, and how he in turn affects the world” (Weintraub 833): in national autobiographies experiences in the colonial world take Nkrumah and Nehru back to a reinterpretation of an “originally given” cultural past, and thus inspire action in a world through the liberation of the nation. Nkrumah’s autobiography is thus titled Ghana; while trying “to trace . . . my own
mental development” Nehru discovered he had produced “a survey of recent Indian history” (xii).

If imperial autobiography teaches us something about imperialism and colonialism, then, it may also teach us something about the critical study of autobiography. In particular, we might be more cautious about an uncritical mapping of the smaller narratives constituted by individual examples of life writing onto Lyotard’s grand narratives, and to an invocation of “non-Western” narratives as either resisting modern grand narratives or subverting them. Such a mapping would appear to repeat the gesture of postcolonialism critiqued by Arif Dirlik, in which a critical methodology formed by a specific politics of location (postcolonialism) seeks to recreate the world after its own image (the postcolonial condition) (508). Unitary selfhood is not only a feature of “Western” autobiography; nor is autobiography, even in the narrow canon which Weintraub and Gusdorf explore, unconcerned with community and the community-defined nature of the self. Indeed, autobiography, John Sturrock notes in a study of canonical autobiographies, is perhaps best seen as a series of negotiations between “apartness” and “association”: in its invitation to readers to share in a life, it is perhaps “the most sociable of literary acts” (19). Autobiographical writing on the shelves of bookstores is Accra, Delhi, or Singapore, seems as much, if not more, expressive of “governing . . . configurations and disciplines of selfhood” as that sold in New York or London, if these configurations and disciplines are thought of as expressive of various modernities, not of the ‘West.’

This insight into autobiography as a space of negotiation may also cause us to rethink critical reading strategies. Paul John Eakin has noted that much of the critical
methodology applied by feminist critics to explore the difference of women’s life-writing can, in fact, be turned back on canonical texts written by me). “[W]e are relational selves leading relational lives,” Eakin notes, and the notion of provisional, flexible, or performative selfhood enables a productive rereading of classics of the autobiographical canon (55). Eakin’s point can surely be extended from a discussion of gender to other elements of grand narratives. I am less sure, however, of Eakin’s second point, that the “the reign of the Gusdorfian model will surely end, and in its place we will see more narratives” which exhibit relational qualities, in the sense both that more narratives will be produced and that older narratives will be re-visioned as relational (55) Under a late modernity which shows no sign of vanishing, there will always be negotiations between the individualizing disciplinary apparatuses of capitalism and the necessity to constitute new or re-imagined communities; autobiography will continue to register these negotiations.
Notes

1 The phase is Carol Kaplan’s. Kaplan notes that “out-law genres” exist “on the borders between colonial and neocolonial systems, where subjectivity, cultural power, and survival are played out in the modern era” (133).

2 Imperialism and Colonialism are closely related, but not identical. In this essay, I follow Jürgen Osterhammel’s distinction, in which the “imperial” is seen as an ideological position emanating from an imperial centre, in contrast to the “colonial,” which describes material conditions and discursive fields within European colonies (15-22).

3 In the ensuing analysis, I have chosen to use the Barthesian distinction between *lisible* and *scriptible* or “readerly” “writerly” texts in Richard Miller’s translation (*S/Z* 4) rather than Lyotard’s distinction between modern and postmodern, in order to indicate my uneasiness with a celebratory rhetoric which conflates the postmodern with contemporary globalisation and thus implicitly sees colonialist rhetoric as unproblematically “modern.” It is interesting in this regard that Lyotard himself is more cautious, at least in retrospect: he remarks that “the essay (Montaigne) is postmodern” in attempting to give a more precise definition of postmodernity (81).

4 This was edited and published by his friend W.E. Stead as *The Last Will and Testament of Cecil John Rhodes* (London: Review of Reviews Office, 1902).

5 In Curzon’s case his authorized biography was written by his former assistant in India, Lawrence Dundas, Earl of Ronaldshay and later Marquess of Zetland.
6 Holden gives a fuller account of Clifford’s career and literary output, and the tensions in his work between exemplary masculinity, imperial rule, and the structural demands of genre.


9 Clifford to Henry Clodd, February 8, 1918. Brotherton Library, University of Leeds.

10 The story would seem to predate the new Resident John Rodger’s account of new agreements made through increased British power in Pahang in 1889: “[T]he periodic raids on girls and female children, by means of which the Sultan’s harem was formerly replenished, entirely ceased from the date of my arrival in Pahang, and the recent Slavery and Forced Labour Regulations, as well as an arrangement with the Sultan that weapons shall only be carried by his Body-guard and immediate personal attendants, will obviate many of the difficulties formerly incidental to the Sultan’s residence at Pekan” (John Rodger: *Annual Report on the State of Pahang for the Year 1889*. CO 437 1:10)

11 All references here are to Hugh Clifford, “Report on certain matters relating to the current state of Pahang,” C0 273 August 3, 1887.

12 His Highness, i.e., Sultan Ahmad of Pahang.

Works Cited


