THE LOST COLONIAL BOY

A journey through a life of drama and adventure in England and Malaya

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Mereo Books

2nd Floor, 6-8 Dyer Street, Cirencester, Gloucestershire, GL7 2PF
An imprint of Memoirs Books. www.mereobooks.com
and www.memoirsbooks.co.uk

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978-1-86151-983-2

First published in Great Britain in 2021
by Mereo Books, an imprint of Memoirs Books.

A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

The address for Memoirs Books can be
found at www.mereobooks.com

Mereo Books Ltd. Reg. No. 12157152

Typeset in 11/15pt Century Schoolbook
by Wiltshire Associates.
Printed and bound in Great Britain

Contents

Acknowledgments

Chris Newton

Editor in Chief, Mereo Books. A huge thank you for his guidance, encouragement, patience and kindness. At the time of publishing we had never met. I was in Canada/USA and Chris in Gloucestershire, UK. The Covid Pandemic had created a new world but Chris surmounted the roadblocks. *www.mereobooks.com* *www.chrisnewton.co.uk*

Jenn Best

Artist, Life Coach, Friend. Technical/Computers skills, organization and artistic talent were key elements in navigating the mine fields of communication during the Pandemic and liaising with the Editor and Publishers across the Atlantic. Thank you, Jenn. *bestjenn01@gmail.com*

Ivy Pan

Illustrator. With thanks for creating the Maps and assisting on the cover. *ivypandesign@gmail.com*

Peter Chester

Old Coathamian. Author "New Lamps for Old" for his permission to use images from his book regarding the old School. Books available on Amazon and Goodreads.

King's Own Royal Regiment Museum, Lancaster.

Image of HMT Empire Windrush 1947

Writers' Group, St. Petersburg, Florida

An eclectic coalescence of wonderful people, who encourage and support each other and share their stories. Thank you for tour support and encouragement over the years.

Introduction

Christopher Ondaatje's book *The Last Colonial* is riveting not only for its title, which spells finality, but with its very personal memories and vivid descriptions of a world that was inhabited by many of us, a world that nurtured us and is now past, as are the lives of many it emboldened. His stories of youth and life in Ceylon (Sri Lanka) struck close to home for me, evoking clear thoughts of my own youth and childhood growing up in Malaya (what is now Peninsular Malaysia) before its independence from Empire. Ondaatje's stories have driven my own search for the world absorbed and lived in by my father in the 1940s and 50s, in Africa, India, Burma and Malaya, the latter being the place where we shared life together. It is in part a story of another age; an age forgotten, or perhaps not, as it shaped the lives of many of us and created experiences and memories that drive us still. There is a siren call to that world.

Into the second decade of the twenty-first century there is a mantra that tells us "sixty is the new forty". Better health, better options in life, better travel, easier living conditions, improved fitness, instant communication and connection are all ours for the asking. But in paying lip service to these offerings from the table of plenty, I have a different view. In my generation many

of us have not lived that safe "cradle to the grave" life offered up among the victory spoils of the Second World War and other wars; spoils provided from the banquet of death and destruction. Some have taken a different path, perhaps dominated by the wanderlust instilled from the lost days.

It is only as I grow older still, with more years behind me than ahead, that I search for the things that shaped me; but it is more than that. It is also the search for the experiences and knowledge and humanity of the personal lives of those closest to me. What is genetic and what is experience driven? What of my parents and grandparents, their early lives, world wars and other battles; the fight to survive through rationing of food and fuel and the loss of life itself on the home front, sicknesses, poverty and the ultimate success in rising from the ashes; a world reshaped and the old order lost and yet they had lives lived with dignity and passion?

Memories are beginning to create a perspective. So I go down memory lane not out of trepidation but with the joy of discovering anew the world I inhabited a lifetime ago.

My inner self has always been haunted, a strong voice always calling, by the Malaya of the 1940s and 1950s. That lush tropical country, its rains, and the seemingly endless canopies of trees and grasses of every shape, size, twists and turns, occupied by and protecting loud colourful birds, the home of flying lemurs, gibbons, tigers, snakes and lizards, all of which are more present in my appreciation now, rather than as a young boy when one was so fearless and part of that nature. The peoples of that Eden were part of the mystique; Malays, Chinese, Tamil, East Indian, European, Eurasian and other mixes; Muslim, Buddhist, Hindu, Christian. Did we see any of those demarcations? Not at all, and I am fortunate that gift of ethos has been with me all my life.

Our youthful bravado never considered that in Malaya there was a military and police operation against the Malay communists

and bandits, with deadly skirmishes won and lost. Friends came and went, some suddenly as they had lost their fathers in that small war that surrounded us, but that too became an experience of life and really did not deter the call of our paradise

I seek my answers in the shape of vignettes which will bring those years back to life; those seeds that were planted and defined my life. Within my soul, I know I will always be that lost colonial boy. That I treasure and pay homage to those that allowed me entry into that world.


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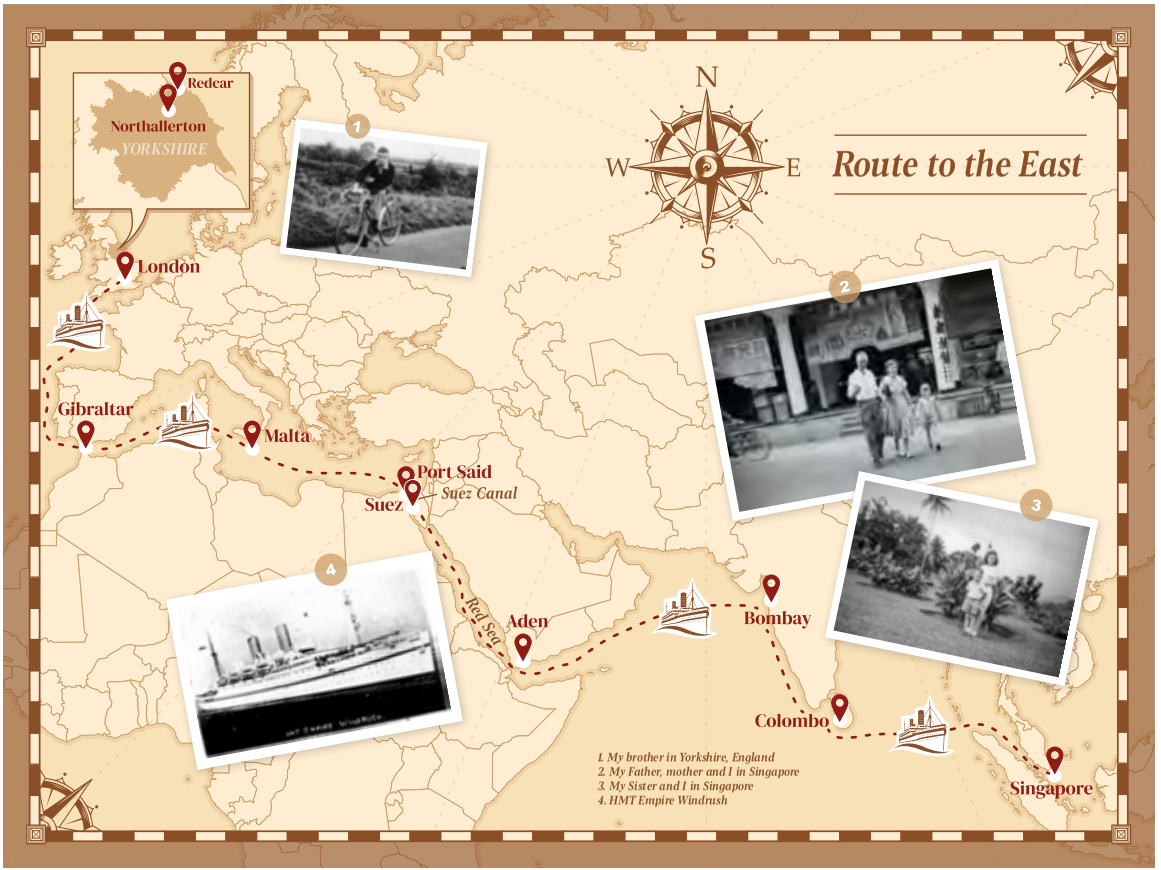
Kota Bharu
Kelantan River
South China Sea
PERAK
KELANTAN
TRENGGANU
Georgetown
PENANG
MALAYA
PAHANG
Kuala Lumpur
SELANGOR
NEGRI SEMBILAN
Seremban
Port Dixon
MALACCA
JOHOR
Strait of Malacca
SUMATRA
SINGAPORE


Redcar
Northallerton
YORKSHIRE
London
Gibraltar
Malta
Port Said
Suez
Suez Canal
Red Sea
Aden
Bombay
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Singapore
N
W
E
S
Route to the East
1
2
3
4
1. My brother in Yorkshire, England
2. My Father, mother and I in Singapore
3. My Sister and I in Singapore
4. HMT Empire Windrush

CHAPTER 1

The early days

My mother, Maud May Gill, born in 1909, was five feet and half an inch according to her passport, and in reality not even that, but she was a giant of a woman. She was the eldest child of seven born into a family of good British coalmining stock from a small village in County Durham in north-east England. My grandmother, Ellen Gittins, was also the daughter of a coal mining family; Grandfather George had made the journey from the coal mining mountains and valleys of Wales.

Grandma Gittins, striking and very tall at five foot nine plus, was a strong, imperious but compassionate woman of great fashion. She ruled any room she entered; she was the centre of attention and energy. It was not only her impressive height and well-poised figure that drew attention; her clothes and panache completed the picture. The darkness of Queen Victoria was gone; there was an enlightened Edwardian world shining brightly, and fashion was in play with the working class. Grandma Ellen would noticeably have a silk brocade or satin blouse and short

ruff at her neck and a short-waisted coat, colourful, with coated buttons on the sleeves and on the front. Her jacket would be left open, the days of constraint being over. Tall as she was, Grandma Ellen's skirt was long, yet not too long to show her shining heeled leather boots, which were tied with perfectly-spaced leather laces. She was a striking figure indeed as she walked between her friends and admirers to take her hallowed seat at the corner of the bar. Her four young daughters always had a hand, willingly or not, in pressing her clothes, helping her dress and polishing her shoes.

Grandad George, a stern taskmaster at work, was not of the hierarchy but one of those who made things happen, a leader in a dangerous industry. Yet he was a gentle man and of much smaller stature than his wife; he was content in her admired shadow. They were a caring and formidable team. He would join her on these evenings, attentive to her as she perched erectly on her corner stool, reserved by right, and then he would move away to spend an easy evening with his fellow miners, sharing tales of life gilded with good strong northern ale and the clink of glasses. These evenings, mainly Friday and Saturday, were a joyous time in these small, bonded communities in low-ceilinged rooms filled with laughter, conversations of new life and sports. For a moment the dark and dangerous coalface and sudden injury or death were locked away, hidden behind the cloud and soothing haze of cigar, pipe and cigarette smoke.

It was on these nights that for a few moments time stopped. It was ethereal. Breaths were held, hearts raced for everyone within hearing distance when, without announcement, Grandad George, the diminutive Welshman, in his high-collared starched white shirt, cuffs and cuff links showing, newly-pressed black suit and high waistcoat with requisite silver fob watch and chain, would glance across the room at his wife. They smiled their smiles. He

would stand and then unleash the most magnificent, soaring and mesmerising tenor voice that ever came out of the valleys of Wales. Unaccompanied, this celestial voice of such purity, a gift, brought tears to the eyes of the hardened coal mining men as the last note was held and then quietly died and there was silence. Granddad George would turn and meet the eyes of his wife, and smiles were exchanged. Conversations resumed for a while as George Gittins took a small sip of his newly-poured ale, just enough to wet his lips, and then silence fell once again as that first tenor note, soaring upwards, unlocked the doors of heaven and the coal miners' world was filled with song, light and hope. To all who had heard him, that voice was never silenced.

By the time Maud Gill was thirty-eight she found herself in one of the farthest outposts of a crumbling British Empire, my Malaya. It was an experience totally out of context to what she must have expected in life, coming from that small, safe, closely-knit community, but one for which she had been unknowingly prepared. She lived through the First World War, a young pre-teen girl, finished school at 15 and then went on to work in the retail trade and then as a nurse's aid, Higher education was not an option, for many cultural reasons. She met and married my father, Charles, in what today is still a rich market town, Northallerton in North Yorkshire. All was idyllic for the young couple for a number of years.

Charles Gill, born in 1907, was the eldest of five children of John and Agnes Gill. The family lived in one of a simple row of brick cottages, with no indoor plumbing and three small bedrooms. The house, under this powerful paternal grandmother's eye was immaculate but sparse in its available comforts. She was another diminutive but powerful woman who ruled with an iron fist throughout her life. John Gill, the grandfather I never met, served in the First World War with his two brothers and carried on his

trade as a builder on his return from the hell they all experienced in France; some were gassed, some wounded.

The five children got the usual basic but good education and were essentially working full time by the time they were fifteen. My father worked in a grocery store that would become a small successful chain in the North East of England, a connection through my grandmother. The control of that connection was cruel enough to provide some assistance, but only sufficient that it did not enable the Gill family to move beyond its presumed station in life. Grandfather John Gill was killed while the family was still young, having fallen and broken his neck whilst on a building site. But the boys kept working, Granny Gill took in laundry (all hand done), and the family made do. My father won an opportunity to go to Britain's Naval Academy but the "Family", owners of a chain of grocery stores and also closely connected to the aristocracy for centuries, the side that could still wield influence from a distance in those days, intervened. They refused to advance money for uniforms etc and decreed that Charles would continue to have a position in their local store.

In short, all the "boys" had interesting lives. Edward became a master tailor and spent his whole life with one company in this craft; Arthur became what we would today call the Chief Operating Officer of a large municipality in Wales; Jack (John) stayed in his home town and was employed by a battery supply company.

Jack had an interesting story. Before the Second World War, he was called upon to repair aircraft engines at various airports in England; he was one of the few who had the skills for this task. A new gentleman showed up one day to work with Jack and he held the lowest rank possible, Aircraftsman. He was a quiet man, a loner, kept to himself and seemed troubled. This man was known as Aircraftsman Shaw, a pseudonym granted so

he could escape his broken life and his hells of war and torture. Aircraftsman Shaw is probably better known to the world as Lawrence of Arabia. His request for his insular life was respected by my uncle.

Charles Gill, my father, whose stories are more entwined with the early part of my own life appears later in the various vignettes that form this book.

Granny Gill would continue to wield a lot of power over the boys in her life. It had been a hard life for her, but she had no complaints, and she commanded the respect of all who crossed her path.

CHAPTER 2

Cleanliness is next to godliness

Granny (Agnes) Gill, the Matriarch – 1878-1962

Cleanliness is next to godliness.' That particular phrase is not specifically written in Holy Scripture, but if it were then surely I have seen, smelled and touched the Promised Land. Cleanliness in all its glory.

My paternal grandmother, Agnes Gill, was born in north-east England in a little coastal town, Tynemouth, in 1878. She was married in the town of Northallerton, North Yorkshire, to John Gill, the grandfather I never knew. They had five children and six grandchildren who also called that idyllic place home. My own father, Charles, the eldest son, was born in 1907. The other three boys also had regal names: Edward, Arthur and John. My aunt inherited her mother's name, Agnes.

The family lived in brick row housing in a sheltered cobblestone walk that connected two streets. Five rooms, three

up, two down, one and a half storeys, no basement or back door. Four boys in one room and the daughter with the parents. No running water or toilets. Access to fresh water was across the cobblestones to a communal tap shared by four families. Their toilets were also communal in that they were all together, spaced over a running stream that connected them to a sewer; however each family had its own space, with each door being locked on the outside by large padlocks. No need to flush. That communal space was immaculate with each family scrubbing and cleaning to keep the scenery fresh, new and healthy. The entrance steps were polished and honed with yellow stone. Cleanliness!

Grandfather John had done many labouring jobs and had also worked in horse stables, but was at his best as a master bricklayer. Granny Gill, as she eventually became known to her children as well as grandchildren, had been a house companion, maid and nurse's aide. The children were well looked after and respected in town, and by their early teens were essentially in full-time employment in the usual infrastructure of a small market town. The brothers and sister had a great loyalty to each other from their earliest days.

The small home was kept pristine and functional, everything in its place, cleaned, washed and ironed. Carpets were taken out and beaten every week. Granny Gill may not have had much, but she had pride, and her children were firmly brought up; they would not disappoint her.

The First World War came and went and touched this small family with its throttling fingers. Grandad John Gill survived the hells of France, as did his brother Ernest. As they were brothers they did not serve in the same regiments, the military playing the odds that separation may alleviate losses to a family. Both survived, although Uncle Ernie, as he was known to all generations, was one of the many gassed in trench battles and

suffered all his life. The greatest loss for the family came in 1927 when my grandfather fell off a ladder while laying bricks, broke his neck and died a few days later.

What to do? This was not the time of social services safety nets. The boys had all been working in part-time jobs and with school finished by the ages of fifteen or sixteen they were starting to apprentice in a number of trades: grocery stores, hardware stores, tailoring. Granny Gill had contacts and decided to take in laundry from the upper classes, limiting her services to just a few clients. The small kitchen, the smallest of the four rooms in the row house (real address Number 4 New Row) became the laundry room. There was an additional stove to boil water, carried from across The Row, and the main fireplace in the living room was put to use on laundry day.

Water was poured from the one common tap into shining metal buckets (perhaps one was white enamel), by Granny Gill, all four foot six of her, and carried across the cobblestones to her small house. A laundry tub and wringer were put to use. The only mechanical part was the wringing machine where the rollers were turned by hand, mainly by Granny. No dryers! Clothes rinsed in separate tubs were taken out to two clothes lines, previously washed down and not too close in case of entanglement. Lines were fixed from the high brick wall across to the hooks on to her own part of the family row house. Wooden props raised the lines and laundry and the breeze was allowed to waft through. People walking through New Row would dodge the obstacle course of lines of laundry.

Drying was watched carefully; too dry can create extra work. Clothes were taken in, slightly damp, neatly folded or hung for more selective drying in front of a coal fire. The whole house took on a fresh scent of pure air wafted down from the North York Moors or from the eastern side, carrying the saltiness of

the North Sea. All mixed in a special elixir, still treasured to this day by those of us who have been privileged to live in that part of heaven on earth. There were two irons on the go, heated by the fire, and the ironing began in the evening; lighting was by gas lamp.

The boys laboured for their mother and passed all their earnings on to her, and the family succeeded. The 'boys', as they were always known, still helped her as they moved on to different parts of the country. She was the lynchpin; they were always in touch by letter and came home twice a year. They could not and would not miss; the Matriarch called. Her pride in presenting herself well was instilled in them all, and they did not let her down.

I can remember as a child and then a young boy walking to Granny Gill's on a laundry day. Her heavy days of taking in laundry had long gone, but there were still sheets and towels and so on, even when she lived alone on her later years. I can still see the cottons and linens, propped on their lines, really a singular line and only half filled, shimmering in the breeze. Cleanliness was still alive. On entering her home there was that whole new level of freshness, pure oxygen. My senses can be stimulated to this day just by the thoughts of walking to see my diminutive grandmother; truly a giant.

Granny Gill's next-door neighbour of almost sixty years was Mrs Martin, a widow from the First World War and a lady who had no children. Their friendship was quiet, private and respectful; there was no intrusion. The odd errand would be run if someone was sick; perhaps if one was passing by the butcher's shop they would enquire if there was something for their neighbour and so on. Mutual, quiet respect and unheralded caring were always in play. They had one other thing in common, and that was their mutual pride in the presentation of their homes. Weekly the

thresholds of their front door steps were scrubbed and honed. The rounded edges would be reddened, or sometimes they would be yellow or white; not a speck of dust in sight, even though exposed to the elements. It was a time-consuming job but both ladies would be down on hands and knees scrubbing away. Cleanliness meant respectability.

Even after decades of seeing each other virtually every day, the two widows would share their daily greeting, in their local dialect, which would go something like this:

"Gran' mornin, Missus Martin."

"Aye, it looks grand. Are thee well then, Missus Gill?"

"Can't complain, Missus Martin, can't complain."

"That's grand then."

All was well in their world. Simple needs were met. To these ladies cleanliness meant respectability. If these jewels of the north did not have much in the way of "brass" (in the Yorkshire dialect, brass means money or wealth), they made up for it with their respectability. Cleanliness!

The lower windows of their homes, one in the kitchen, the other in the living area, were small-paned and of the thicker glass typical of those built in the late 1800s. Light came in through the swirled glass and in part some privacy could be maintained through its thickness. The window panes and white frames sparkled, up and down. No smears or marks left for criticism, no grandchildren's fingermarks; we knew our place.

For each of the chores there was a prescribed day. The weather had to be fought in the winter for the right to wash and dry, but if ever there was a wind it was always a good drying day; God's breath. We always knew where Granny Gill would be on a specific day; laundry Monday, steps and windows Tuesday. Bustling market days in the town, enshrined by centuries of tradition, were Wednesdays and Saturdays, and shopping was also done on

these days at the traditional bakers and butchers. Tuesdays and Thursdays could also be days for visiting grandchildren in town.

A lady of vigour, determination, autocracy and a caring strength, Granny Gill was known to all the established storekeepers and owners. She was greeted courteously by name even if just passing by. She always wore a coat and I never saw her with it unbuttoned, except for the hottest days; a hat or freshly-pressed headscarf finished off her wardrobe. Her small heeled shoes probably pushed her to the magnificent height of four feet seven inches. She may not have had much, but she was always well presented.

On the few times I accompanied her as a young boy or teenager, I treasured the greetings she would receive as she walked along the High Street. Men on the pavements or standing in their storefronts would raise a hand to their foreheads as they nodded their respect and say something like this, in their quiet, dour, yet sincere ways:

" Grand mornin' Mrs Gill. Well, are we?"

"Well enough, Mr Thomson. Well enough. Nowt to complain about." (Nowt meaning "nothing", in the Yorkshire dialect).

"This young lad must be your Charlie's son? Spittin' image he is, nay doubt abaht it."

"Aye, he's a gran' lad alreet".

My shoes were clean, socks straight, sweater and pants matched, hands and face were clean. I am sure I made her proud.

Cleanliness was certainly next to godliness for this woman we all revered and whom the small market town respected. These are memories firmly etched in my mind. I can still see the row house, the cobble stones; I can smell the breeze and the market odours, the clean and busy streets and the smiles of respect from the shopkeepers.

When I revisited this birthplace of mine in September 2017, the High Street and the Wednesday market were replaying the symphony of old. Thomson the Butchers (close to New Row) was still in business, into its fourth generation, but had just sold out to a private company. It was late in the day, and the store was not busy but it was being scrubbed down by diligent staff, all in their blue striped butcher-aprons. As I entered I received friendly greetings, shared that I was just passing and recalled Butcher Thomson's. Some still remembered the old Butcher Thomson, the kindly man who doffed his cap to my grandmother. They were sad to see the last of the family selling up after so many years. Good Yorkshire folk!

Buttressed close by is the All Saints Anglican Church, a magnificent sight with its bell tower. Foundations from the 7th century still exist in parts of the church, as do major stone walls constructed in the 9th and 13th centuries. It was our family church, where baptisms, weddings and funerals took place. My father and mother were married there, my sister, brother and I were baptised there and Granny Gill and Grandfather John are close by in the Cemetery. To this day the church grounds and adjoining cemetery have immaculate grounds. Granny Gill is surely at rest there.

Across the street is the Porch House, an old historic house and inn that was built in 1584, some parts of it even earlier. King Charles I was a guest there in 1640 and made a return visit in 1647 as a prisoner. My wife Carolyn and I stayed there in 2012 and 2017 as guests, not prisoners. Our room was that originally used by the King.

The small homes on New Row are gone, but the row is still an active passage and walking route between major streets. My parents' old house, some ten minutes walking distance away and over a hundred years old ,is still in existence and well kept.

My 2017 visit allowed me to breathe in the pure and nostalgic air that provides the scent of memories and lets us know we are home once again in God's Own County. Cleanliness and godliness in one.