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The Whore and the Madonna: The Ambivalent Positionings of Women in British Imperial Histories on Southeast Asia

Christine Doran

College of Indigenous Futures, Education and Arts, Charles Darwin University, Darwin 0810, Australia; christine.doran@cdu.edu.au

Abstract: This article examines how British imperial historians of the early twentieth century, the zenith of the colonial era, approached the writing of British colonial women into their histories. In the early nineteenth century, hundreds of British women went out to the British colonies in Southeast Asia, yet to date, their stories and experiences have largely been neglected by historians. In general, the nature of the imperial project, with its emphasis on masculinist values of conquest, territorial expansionism and despotic administration, left little scope for the inclusion of women's experiences and contributions in its histories. This article focuses closely on how British historians of the period of high imperialism approached writing about two prominent women, the wives of an imperialist hero, Stamford Raffles. It shows how conventional assumptions about women were entangled with prevailing gendered ideologies, such as the madonna/whore stereotypes, which in turn were enmeshed with notions concerning Orientalism, class and race. The result was a deeply ambivalent portrayal of these colonial women, which awkwardly brought together divergent elements of sexual scandal, wifely devotion, literary achievement, delicate health, career promotion, emotional care taking and judgments about beauty. These positionings tell us more about contemporary cultural discourses than they do about the women themselves.

Keywords: British imperialism; colonial women; imperial history; madonna–whore; Southeast Asia; Olivia Devenish; Sophia Hull; Stamford Raffles



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1. Introduction

In the early nineteenth century, hundreds of British women spent at least part of their lives in Britain's Southeast Asian colonies: the so-called Straits Settlements of Singapore, Penang and Malacca, Java and Bencoolen in south-western Sumatra. Most were there because of family relationships, as wives, sisters or daughters of British men who were colonial administrators, merchants, planters, soldiers, sailors and missionaries; a smaller but significant number of single women also came out to the colonies to work as teachers, governesses, nurses, missionaries and so on. Yet in general, these women have received scarcely a mention in historical accounts of British colonialism in Southeast Asia. Until recently, such histories were imbued with a masculinist 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 generally accorded to women suggests that the masculinist orientation has yet to be completely overcome. However, there were two notable exceptions to this general invisibility of women in imperial history. Two women, Olivia Devenish and Sophia Hull, 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 Bencoolen and founder of British Singapore.

In this article, the focus will be on British imperial histories written, approximately, during the first half of the twentieth century—the high point of both the colonial era and the production of imperial history. The aim is to analyse the historiography to examine the

ways in which Raffles' wives, Olivia and Sophia, were represented in historical writing. It is argued that historical writing on the two women was deeply affected by an entrenched psychological and sociological predisposition to categorise women in terms of a madonna–whore dichotomy. It is also shown how historians' portraits of these women focused on a narrow range of issues revolving around beauty and attractiveness, and the roles of a supportive helpmate, a restricted range of concerns not unrelated to the madonna–whore stereotypes. First, the characteristics of the madonna–whore dualism in European cultural discourses are examined briefly. The main contributions to historical writing about Raffles in the early twentieth century are then outlined. I then turn to how the madonna–whore dichotomy played out in early historical constructions of Olivia and Sophia Raffles.

2. Madonnas and Whores

Conceptualisation of a madonna–whore dichotomy was developed as a result of the psychoanalytic studies of Sigmund Freud who, in 1912, drew attention to a psychological malaise which he found to be so widespread in contemporary society that he called it “the most prevalent form of degradation in erotic life” (Freud 1924, p. 203). 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, p. 204). That this confluence of emotions often failed to occur was of great significance for social life and in particular 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. (Freud 1924, p. 204)

As was usually the case in his work, Freud's analysis focused without explanation or caveat on male psycho-sexual development, though in this case, he speculated that analogous processes might be at work within the female psyche, but without specifying in what way.

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. This syndrome has often been given the short-hand name of the madonna–whore complex.

Affection and desire seem to inhabit different spheres, often being resolved only by splitting his relations between two kinds of women—one noble, honourable, and pure (the virgin figure), the other a sexual profligate (the prostitute figure). He treats the first with asexual admiration, while he is sexually attracted to, yet morally and socially contemptuous of, the second. (Grosz 1990, p. 129)

Freud believed 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. The madonna–whore dichotomy has been used as an organising principle and a central motif in historical writing, such as in *Damned Whores and God's Police: The Colonization of Women in Australia* by Summers (1975). This work was a path-breaking feminist analysis, which traces how the history of women in Australia has been conditioned by such stereotyping.

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 argued, 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, p. 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. The madonna–whore complex is employed here,

certainly not in any prescriptive sense, but descriptively, to identify a consistent tendency of thought which deeply affected the practices of imperial historians over a period of about half a century. The primary aim of this article 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.

3. Overview of Raffles Historiography

Thomas Stamford Raffles (1781–1826), usually referred to as Stamford Raffles, was born at sea off Jamaica. His father was a ship’s captain involved in West Indian trading; little is known of his mother. Raffles obtained employment with the English East India Company at the age of fourteen. After working for nine years as a lowly clerk in their central office in Leadenhall Street, London, 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 (now Pulau Pinang), Batavia (now Jakarta), Bencoolen (now Bengkulu) and Singapore. Since virtually all of the comments of imperial historians on his wives, Olivia and Sophia, were written within the context of studies of the life and career of Raffles, a brief survey of the considerable literature on 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 foundational work on the subject. Boulger included many long excerpts from primary sources readily available to him at the India Office in London. 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, a Presbyterian minister stationed in Singapore, contributed a chapter on the “founder” of the colony to a collection of essays marking the centenary of British settlement (Cross 1921, pp. 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 modestly as a “hack writer turned historian”, Hahn stated that her book would not “contribute to our knowledge of Raffles” because she had “nothing new to offer” (Hahn 1946, pp. 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”. Such self-effacing prefaces were at the time often expected of women writers.

A significant later biography was *Raffles of the Eastern Isles* (1954) by Charles 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 Harold Pearson, who published a short biography, *This Other India* (1957), was more sceptical regarding Raffles’ claims to greatness and went so far as to question his honesty and probity.

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

It should be mentioned that more recent historiography, outside of the ambit of this article, has been far more scathing about Raffles' status in history. 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, p. 50). More recent historiography on Raffles has been even more critical and caustic (Ng 2019; Sa'at et al. 2021).

4. Inventing Olivia

For historians writing in the early twentieth century, little was known about the family origins or early life of Olivia Mariamne Devenish (1771–1814), or indeed her later life, despite assiduous research by Boulger, Wurtzburg and other historians interested in Raffles. Certainly, there was a dearth of primary source material: only two of her letters were available. Lack of information accounted, in part, for the air of mystery which clung to her. The lack of solid evidence gave historians wide scope for imaginative construction, the results of which reveal more about the contents of their imaginations than about Olivia's life.

Wurtzburg stated that it was probable that Olivia Devenish was born in India in 1771 of a Circassian mother and Irish father and that she was brought up in India and then taken to England by her parents (Wurtzburg 1954, pp. 744–46). 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 at the East India Company's Madras station, in 1793, and returned to England after his death in 1800 (Boulger [1897] 1973, p. 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 Malacca (now 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 began with her physical attributes. Historians were 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, pp. 29–30)

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, pp. 14–15)

For readers of the early twentieth century, all of the various ancestries and cultural lineages that historians attributed to Olivia had connotations associated with Orientalist myths. In particular, the identification of her mother as Circassian would have evoked images of harems, prostitution and sexual slavery. The Circassians (or Adyghe) were a people who inhabited the north-western Caucasus region and part of the eastern coast of the Black Sea. In the early modern period, the rulers of Crimea claimed sovereignty over the Circassians and forced them to pay taxes in the form of slaves, who were in high demand in the slave markets of Crimea and the Ottoman empire. In western Orientalist discourses,

Circassian women, who were often depicted in Orientalist art in slave markets and harems (Thornton 1994, pp. 163–65), became associated with the supposed sexual debauchery of the seraglio (Kabbani 1986, p. 81) and with what Lidia Zhigunova has called the “Circassian beauty myth” (Zhigunova 2018, p. 180). The class positioning of Olivia, as a widow in poor circumstances, seeking welfare assistance from her husband’s former employer, added to the sense that her social background lacked status and respectability. Olivia’s physical characteristics and her family origins formed the basis upon which historians constructed an image of a woman of beauty and allure, identified variously with Latin, gypsy, Circassian, Irish and Indian 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 took great interest in, and exercised imagination over, Olivia’s sexual history. In addition to alleged affairs before she met Raffles, it was asserted that Olivia had sexual and/or romantic liaisons with several of Raffles’ colleagues and friends, including William Ramsay, Lord Minto (Gilbert Elliot-Murray-Kynynmound) and Dr John Leyden. Apart from an inherent prurient interest, these later relationships were of concern to Raffles’ biographers because these men assisted Raffles’ career through patronage and preferment.

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, Major-General Thomas Murray, suggested that Olivia herself made this claim when she was in Penang (Murray 1836); the source of Murray’s hostility was almost certainly envy aroused by the rapid advancement of Raffles’ career. Wurtzburg lent his support to this shaky set of suppositions (1951, pp. 173–75). There was then the allegation that Olivia had an illegitimate child fathered by the captain of the ship in which she sailed to India in 1792; this was also rumoured in Penang. 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 (Murray 1836).

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, p. 8). As soon as Raffles learnt of this statement, he denied it (Boulger [1897] 1973, p. 15). Yet, Pearson considered the refutation “totally unconvincing” (Pearson 1957, p. 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 importunate and boring. As Pearson put it, comparing Olivia to a colonised territory, “A woman and an island, both beautiful, gave Raffles his opportunity” (Pearson 1957, p. 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 each 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 also speculated about her subsequent emotional attachments and their consequences for Raffles’ career. While in Penang, Olivia was 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 claimed that Leyden fell in love with her (Wurtzburg 1954, p. 38) and that when they met again in 1811 during preparations for the assault on Java, his feelings for her were unchanged.

With Lord Minto, the governor-general of Bengal from 1807 to 1813, Olivia also developed a close relationship. Minto met Olivia at Malacca, and they spent time together

in Java following the British conquest. After his departure from Java, Olivia corresponded with him. 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. (Bastin 1969, illustration no. 8)

It was quite common at the time for subordinates to express themselves in such effusive terms in communications with their social superiors. For his part, Minto expressed admiration for Raffles' "great lady, with dark eyes, lively manner, accomplished and clever" (quoted by Boulger [1897] 1973, p. 11). Historians went 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 passé beauty, definitely out of the running" (Hahn 1946, pp. 29–30). 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 benefitted directly from them.

It was said, for instance, that Raffles was gratified by Leyden's attentions to his wife, as reflecting well on himself. 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, pp. 66–67)

These events provoked much historical comment and speculation about the complexities of the triangular relationships among Raffles, Olivia and Leyden. By including Raffles within 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, p. 47).

The significance of this ménage 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. Historians 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 helpmate. In constructing this image, historians drew 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 Malacca prior to the invasion of Java. Abdullah's comments on Olivia were frequently 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 [1849] 1970, p. 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 been recognised by historians. Indeed, the value Abdullah places in the above description of Olivia on industriousness, studiousness and language learning was consistent with his general political program (Milner 1995, chp. 2). Abdullah aimed to reconstruct gender relations in Malaya, an important but less recognised, aspect of the development of Malayan political thought.

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 ancillary capacity. Like British women, Malay women should be industrious supporters of their husbands, competent advisors and effective but subordinate junior partners. According to Abdullah, this role as active partners to their husbands would legitimate a higher status for women within the Malay household, though always in a subsidiary role.

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 [1849] 1970, p. 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 program 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 assistant.

Another historical portrayal of Olivia emphasised a different aspect of her wifely role of helpmate: 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 was little written evidence on which he could have based his account; therefore, 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, pp. 44–45)

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 wrote on Raffles 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, p. 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, p. 15). Raffles' own remarks thus corresponded to a twin-sided image of Olivia: as mysterious enchantress and as domestic helpmate. Historians 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, p. 23).

5. Constructing Sophia

As a contrast to the complex but notably meretricious image which historians invented for Olivia, an image of Sophia was constructed emphasizing her madonna-like characteristics. These included her connections to family, both her family of origin with close associations to empire and her own family which she helped build with Raffles; her relatively unglamorous appearance, which the historians commented upon in detail; and her loyalty and devotion to her husband and, after his death, to his interests.

Unlike Olivia Devenish, Sophia Hull (1786–1858) 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 1776–1780. 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 1815 Mary, Sophia's younger sister 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. Compared to Olivia's obscure background, more is known of Sophia's family origins, which were comfortably and 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" (Bastin 1991, p. vii).

Sophia's physical attractiveness, or more often the lack of it, was much discussed by historians of empire. 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, p. 56)

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

Furthermore, as a supportive helpmate, 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 historical 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 agonising 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 was seldom portrayed as an active helpmate to her husband during his life, she was 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*. Even Syed Hussein Alatas, who severely criticised Raffles’ public career, castigating him as “philosophically and ethically a dwarf” (Alatas 1971, p. 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” (Alatas 1971, p. 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; Hare and Raffles had been 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, pp. 36–38). 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 generally gave her little credit for her editorial and literary achievement. 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, p. 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 was also criticised). But historians did not hesitate 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, p. 8). Donald Davies referred to this as Sophia’s “one womanly failing” (Davies 1957, p. 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, pp. 59, 109).

Sophia’s success as a wife, like Olivia’s, was judged by the 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. (Boulger [1897] 1973, p. 607)

No similar comment occurs in the rest of Raffles’ voluminous correspondence. On this slim foundation, historians did not hesitate 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, p. 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. (Boulger [1897] 1973, p. 415)

6. Conclusions

Of the many British women who lived in Southeast Asia in the early nineteenth century, Olivia Devenish and Sophia Hull attracted unusual interest from imperial historians because they were the wives of Stamford Raffles. The purpose of this article was to review and analyse historical commentary regarding these two women.

Over a period of about half a century, roughly the first half of the twentieth century, 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 supportive helpmate, were very narrow and the assessments sometimes harsh. Olivia was given most credit for her beauty, Sophia for her devotion. Often, historians drew sharp contrasts between the two. Lack of evidence did not restrain historians from imaginative construction, speculation and judgment.

Significantly, the ways in which the two women were 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; her literary ambition, however, even in service to her husband’s reputation, was a discordant element in this blameless image as constructed by historians. Olivia’s gypsy-style “Latin” looks, Circassian family background and scandalous reputation more readily fitted images associated with whoredom. The portrait developed of her also drew upon Orientalist mythologies. The class differences between the two women reinforced their positioning in terms of the madonna–whore dichotomy. Simple categorisation as a whore, however, did not sit well with Olivia’s role as wife of an imperial hero. To meet the discursive requirements of imperialist biography, modification and domestication of Olivia’s meretricious image was necessary; and for this, historians were able to turn to the reflections of an indigenous, pro-British commentator, Abdullah. This produced a twin-sided, ambivalent representation of Olivia, the ambiguity of which accounts in large part for the air of mystery which continued to surround her. Imperial historical writing on Raffles’ wives during the early twentieth century revealed more about the mental constructs and gendered perspectives of the historians than about the characters of Olivia and Sophia. The incorporation of women into imperial histories was not smooth or seamless; instead, it laid bare contradictions and ambivalences within pervasive ideologies of both empire and gender.

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