

Susan Morgan. *Bombay Anna: The Real Story and Remarkable Adventures of The King and I Governess*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008. pp. 274.

In this labour of love, Susan Morgan has excavated Anna Leonowens's intentionally buried family history and identity. She compels the reader of her definitive book on Leonowens, *Bombay Anna: The Real Story and Remarkable Adventures of The King and I Governess*, to contemplate, not just the motivations behind Anna Leonowens's decision to repeatedly reconstitute her identity, but also to consider what makes up an individual's identity and how biographers might write about it. "Is who we are inevitably determined, or a matter of choice? And when we choose, are we simply lying, deceiving ourselves and everyone else, or are we in some sense reborn?"(9-10) Morgan offers a well-researched account of Leonowens's background, not as exposé, but as a way to interpret her historically contextualized rationale for self-invention.

Morgan is a professor of English at Miami University whose work considers British imperial travel literature written by women, notably in *Place Matters: Gendered Geography in Victorian Women's Travel Writings about Southeast Asia* (1996). In the current work, she takes up the dilemmas involved in identity construction, an issue long debated by biographers, gender/queer theorists, and historians who focus on the constitution of social identity categories. Anna Leonowens's life (1831–1915) offers a perfect vehicle through which Morgan examines, not simply the absorbing capacity of one ingenious woman to invent and reinvent herself within the constricting confines of racial, gender and class boundaries of the British empire in Asia, but also the resulting controversies about the value of Leonowens's contributions to scholarship on nineteenth century Thailand (Siam).

Morgan begins by rehashing the three best known construc-

tions of Anna Leonowens's identity: the identity fabricated by the subject herself; that created by American missionary Margaret Landon in her book, *Anna and the King of Siam*, which became the basis for the Broadway musical and Hollywood movies and which is one imbued with a sense of Western religious and cultural superiority; and the equally conjectured historical figure constructed by Leonowens's harshest detractor, W. S. Bristowe. Bristowe insinuated that Anna Leonowens lied about her own identity and, by extension, about all she had written on Siam. Bristowe, a naturalist and arachnid specialist—his works include *The Book of Spiders* (1947) and *The World of Spiders* (1958)—found his way to Thailand in search of spiders, but also developed an interest in Anna's son, Louis Leonowens, who became the subject of Bristowe's book, *Louis and the King of Siam* (1976).

At issue in all three constructions of Anna Leonowens is her racial and class heritage: was she born in Britain to respectable white parents, as Landon and Leonowens herself claimed, or was she born in India to a poor British private and his Anglo-Indian wife? A related debate exists among scholars of Thailand, who suspiciously eye Leonowens's singular account of the intimate life of Siam's royal family, often dismissing her writings as mendacious on the grounds that she purposefully fabricated her own life story. Morgan handles this clash sensitively and deftly. She refuses to simply accept Bristowe's interpretation and critically contextualizes Leonowens's version. "I do offer the hidden facts of Anna's background and activities. But I use those historical facts in the service of exploring what to make of Anna's tossing facts aside in the reinvention of herself."² That process becomes the story Morgan tells as she reconstructs in absorbing detail the more fascinating "real" life of Anna Leonowens.

Morgan scoured archival sources, personal letters, and hitherto "undiscovered materials," to assemble and contextualize Anna Leonowens's long life. Following her critical introduction to the subject's life as variously portrayed in scholarly, fictional, play, and film sources, Morgan plunges into her own narrative. The biography is divided into fourteen chronologically sequential chapters, beginning

with Leonowens's grandparents and ending with Margaret Landon's posthumous account. Two appendixes provide additional contextual information about the British East India Company and government in India, and about class, race and gender hierarchies in British India.

Anna's grandfather, Billy Glascott, who was born in rural England, sailed to Bombay in 1810. There, as a member of the British East India Company's low ranking officer corps, he married a woman about whom little is known except that she could not have been European. Morgan argues that Anna's grandmother was a locally-born Eurasian woman.⁽²³⁾ The two had a daughter, Mary Anne, who at the age of thirteen married Thomas Edwards, a British soldier of the East India Company. Mary Anne was already widowed when in 1831, two years after her marriage, she gave birth to Anna Harriett Edwards, her second daughter, in Bombay. Mary Anne's second marriage, in 1832, to Limerick-born Patrick Donahue, Anna's stepfather, evidently brought financial and social success. When Patrick died in India in 1864 he left a will and property that provided Anna's mother with financial security. Morgan describes the community life lived by British East India Company families through the story of Anna Leonowens's parents.

In telling the story of Anna Edwards's life in India, Morgan asserts her authorial presence, reminding readers that "Anna herself has been the greatest obstacle to discovering anything of her personal history. She threw away or destroyed any records, family letters, or souvenirs and replaced them with lies." Leonowens had claimed that she and her older sister, Eliza, were born and grew up in Wales, and had been educated there when their parents sailed away to India. She reported that the girls had been sent to Bombay when she was fifteen, having never before met their stepfather.⁽⁴²⁾

Morgan replaces these false claims with the "real" life, based upon the evidence and traces that she has disinterred. Anna grew up as a mixed race "army brat" in a military barracks occupied by people of various races and creeds. Morgan interprets this in the most positive, perhaps anachronistic, light, crediting Leonowens's religious and racial tolerance to this childhood. Anna did not take the

standard path of early teenage marriage prescribed for lower-class Eurasian girls in India. Instead, Morgan notes, she got married at the relatively late age of eighteen to a company clerk, Thomas Louis Leon Owens, who had emigrated from Ireland to India in the 1840s to escape the potato famine. Morgan uses Thomas's letters to Anna to reconstruct their relationship, which was intensely sentimental and romantic. According to Morgan, Leonowens developed a "highly flexible subjectivity, an ability to shape herself into a person who could fit with whatever culture she found herself living in, and at the same time keep a strong sense of self, whoever at the moment that self happened to be. The Anglo-Indian child running free in the camp, the studious teenager, the young wife and mother in Bombay, the British governess in the royal palace in Siam, the antislavery professional lecturer in Philadelphia and New York, the musical doyenne in Germany, the liberated woman and patron of the arts in Canada: Anna Harriett was every one of these characters and at home in them all." (46) Morgan emphasizes Leonowens's own agency, her control over her multiple identities, but balances this by placing her firmly within the context of nineteenth-century racial, gender, and class boundaries.

Leonowens's self-invention begins in chapter six, appropriately titled, "Metamorphosis." Morgan retraces her steps from Bombay to Singapore where Anna Leonowens forged a new identity as British, white and upper class—an identity she had to claim in order to paradoxically critique and invalidate it. Morgan convincingly shows why and how Anna Leonowens accomplished this task. Little documentation exists for the period between 1852, when Anna and her husband left Bombay, to 1859, when she arrived in Singapore, but Morgan's expert sleuthing reveals that the couple moved to Australia. Two surviving children, Avis and Louis, were born in Perth, and in 1857 the family moved to Penang, Malaya, where Thomas worked and died ingloriously as a hotel manager. Anna's past died with him.

By the time Anna Leonowens arrived with her young children in Singapore, she had concocted a brilliant story about her past to dis-

suade anyone from prying and to convince everyone that she was a British lady. The story, later exposed by Bristowe as a fabrication, was that she had been born in Wales, had married a Major and had given birth to two children in England. Her mother had remarried a cruel, crass man who disapproved of Anna's marriage. All communication had ceased after her mother's death. Her own fortune had been lost in the economic collapse following the Indian Mutiny and her husband had died in a tiger hunt. As Morgan notes, "Successfully passing as white, British, and [a member of the] gentry required that no one ever find out about her mixed-race, lower-class origins."⁽⁷⁰⁾ For Morgan, Leonowens's creation of this new identity "was an act of imagination and courage, and also of practical sense" because it defied rigid social inequities and enabled her to gain for herself and her children the privileges of class and race.⁽⁷³⁾ Morgan's appreciation of this feat is understandable, but it also prevents a more sustained critique that might have shed light on the dark shadows cast by Leonowens's lies, notably the requirement of absolute severance of relations with living family members, including her mother in India.

Morgan's treatment of the relatively well-known episodes of Leonowens's life in Siam, where she taught English to consorts and children in the royal palace of King Mongkut (who reigned between 1851 and 1868), offers some new perspectives. Personal letters exchanged between Leonowens and her daughter Avis, and letters written to them by palace women, are rare sources of a particular kind of voice, and in including such material Morgan makes an original contribution to the scholarship on gender and class in Siam. Morgan also revisits the contested issue of the value of Leonowens's work as a means to understand Siam, arguing that her books were neither fully fictional nor factual, but highly imaginative, rich sources of biographical and cultural information. Morgan argues that Leonowens "objected to King Mongkut's harem not because she supported British imperialism, not because she was a repressed Victorian prude who was under the sway of the rigid American Protestant missionaries in Bangkok and rejected sexuality, but because she came to know and care about some of the women in the harem."⁽¹²⁸⁾ Leonowens

raged against the harem in her writing because she saw it as a form of slavery. She unremittently held King Mongkut responsible for it, and presented his consorts as heroic and humane. Morgan's admiration for Leonowens and her courageous stance on such issues is evident.

Leonowens left Siam permanently and first stepped foot on British soil in 1867, although she maintained the fiction that this was a return to home. She had cemented her upper class identity in Siam, and had obtained a unique experience of life there that would be the basis of her future life and income in the United States. After moving there with her daughter, Avis, she wrote books about Siam, joined the lecture circuit, and mingled with literati, abolitionists, and publishers. She ultimately became a Canadian family matriarch to her eight grandchildren and travelled extensively, dying in 1915.

Morgan's final chapter follows the activities of Ken and Margaret Landon, two American Christian missionaries, as they intersected with Siam, Leonowens, and American foreign policy in Siam. Margaret Landon revived Anna Leonowens's story on the page, stage, and screen in the 1940s. This is the least well-integrated chapter, but it does raise, indirectly, the question of what biographers add to their subject matter. Landon, according to Morgan, layered Anna Leonowens's own fabricated story with elements of her own conservative Christian values. What, then, is Morgan adding?

Although Morgan convincingly elucidates Leonowens's courageous anti-imperial self-inventions that flouted British imperial class, gender, and racial hierarchies, she fails to explore with equal creativity Leonowens's potentially vainglorious and callous choices. Morgan seems determined to demonstrate that Anna was better off growing up in India than in Britain, where her education would have likely been worse, and her days spent labouring on a farm. In India, by contrast, she had far more freedom and learned racial and religious tolerance rather than enmity. These insights are more speculative than they are linked to any direct evidence from the subject's own life. Similarly, Morgan's generous interpretation of Leonowens's motivations might have been better balanced with an equally critical exploration of her choices, including the nineteen

year lapse in contact with Louis and the decision to sever all ties with her natal family in India. A teenaged Louis fled his debts in the United States in 1874 and did not see his mother again for nearly two decades. Anna Leonowens refused his requests to send money. How else might this split be interpreted?

Perhaps the danger of biography as a lens through which to view history is that it can funnel vision so that only those dimensions of life relevant to the subject of the biography are “seen” by the author, and therefore by the reader. For example, Avis and her husband appear to have had a much stronger relationship with Anna than with each other. Avis seems not to have existed except as a vessel to reproduce children, children who were then raised by the matriarch Anna. Alternative readings of Anna Leonowens hover around Morgan’s narrative like wisps of smoke that vanish as soon as you look at them. Morgan’s greatest fault, an understandable one given Leonowens’s exceptional life, is that she occasionally sympathizes too intensely with her subject at the price of failing to bring her otherwise critical mind to bear on interpretation.

Morgan acknowledges the paradox of Leonowens’s life—her lifelong disdain for imperialism and her commitment to the rights of local peoples is unmistakable, and must be weighed against her claims to an elite, white British status and against her decision to cut all ties to family members who might expose her background. Anna Leonowens is revealed as a principled yet deeply flawed human being.

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