

Notes on the Malayan Trilogy

By Liana Burgess

"East? They wouldn't know the bloody East if they saw it. Not if you was to hand it to them on a plate would they know it was the East. That's where the East is, there." He waived his hand wildly into the black night. "Out there, west. You wasn't there, so you wouldn't know. Now I was. Palestine Police from the end of the war till we packed up. That was the East. You was in India, and that's not the East any more than this is. So you know nothing about it either. So you needn't be talking."

Nabby Adams, supine on the bed, grunted. It was four o' clock in the morning and he did not want to be talking. He had had a confused coloured dream about Bombay, shot with sharp pangs of unpaid bills. Over it all had brooded thirst, thirst for a warmish bottle of Tiger beer. Or Anchor. Or Carlsberg. He said, "Did you bring any beer back with you?"

I am revising the Italian proofs of **Malesia**, or, as the trilogy sounded in its original title, **The Long Day Wanes**

. According to what Anthony tells us, it was his first wife Lynne who found the title in "Ulysses" by Tennyson, a not-so oblique reference to the British Empire – The Long Day – at its Dämmerung, its sunset.

They arrived in Malaya, or, better, The Federation of Malaya (*Persekutan Tanah Melayu*) in Late August 1954 and we have a chronicle of those years with their correct geographical placenames in the last part of

Little Wilson and Big God.

But when one reads one book after the other (

Time for a Tiger

,
The Enemy in the Blanket, Beds in the East,)

one does not think of mere historical factuality: one rides with the story and the characters. The opening is a sort of debate about the nature of the East. To the Irishman, Flaherty, who served in the Palestine Police, East is Palestine, and not Malaya, which, naturally, for us Europeans is further east than India but which to Nabby Adams, the deuteragonist we meet on the very first

page of the book, is no east at all: it is half of his home, the other half being Northampton. Malaya, east or no east, is a foreign country and he does not speak or understand the language. Hindi and English are his idioms. From one side of the loom to the other in this huge tapestry (or

tenture

, since we speak in Angers) of

The Long Day Wanes

we run into the changing , interchanging meaning of East, Far East and West, Far West which imbues the weft with different colourings, a leitmotif, if we prefer a musical analogy, announcing itself and then disappearing into the background before emerging many times over, modified, modulated.

It all began at the opening of the XVII^e century, in India.

The East India Company which was chartered by Elizabeth I^e in 1600 over two centuries later employed in its administrative service the British civilian Stamford Raffles who, however, took part in the capture of Java from the Dutch and while a governor of Sumatra was responsible for the acquisition and foundation of Singapore in 1819. Singapore was for some time the capital of the federation of Malaysia (now it is Kuala Lumpur). What it is perhaps useful to remember is that East in this case is not the East of Marco Polo, but the East of Christophorus Columbus, the post-Columbus East, rather, which has to identify itself by opposing itself to the West Indies. Columbus' mistake of thinking that he had reached India on his way to China, in his effort to prove that the earth is round but had landed in a new continent instead, has obliged us Europeans to have to add the qualifier West every time we say Indian, or India.

Of course there are also the Indians of East India who emigrated to the West Indies and when they, like V.S. Naipaul, born in a Brahmin family of Hindu parents, went back to their homeland, or home continent, quite often they underwent a very thorough shock. Naipaul, as a consequence in 1964 wrote **An Area of Darkness**. What he felt is implicit in the title. Thus, when we say West Indian the person referred to can simultaneously be East and West Indian.

Oh, East is East, and West is West, and never the twain shall meet

, says Kipling in "The Ballad of East and West". But that was, I think in 1892 (**Barrack-Rooms Ballads**) but now

in mid-'50 when John Wilson, later Anthony Burgess, is putting down on paper what he sees, what he hears, what he smells, the world is reshaping itself. Soon after we will be entering the area of post-colonialism with its incredible racial and religious massacres. Incredible because some thought that the end of colonialism would be an end to all that. Victor Crabbe, the un-protagonist, in a way, of the trilogy, falls for Malaya, shuttling between the East and West coast of the peninsula (another sub-theme of the same geographical-cultural opposition) and finally wanting to stay East forever or to that bitter end which he sometimes feels is the doom of the liberal imagination His wife Fenella, however, the other pillar of the conjugal arch, breaks the symmetry and goes back westward but after falling in love with that East that she has set out hating, an East in the shape of a sultan

, *abang*

, rather, who has chosen London and La Côte d'Azur for his exile. And the albino-white lawyer, Hardman, a former classmate of Victor's, who has turned Muslim and married a Malaya Muslim, 'Che Normah binte Abdul Aziz, goes East to La Mecca (which is actually west if you come from Kuala Lumpur) in order to become a

hadji,

a holy man, so that he can fulfil his wife's ambition, conversion and merging of West to East, of Christian to Muslim, of having, in other words, a whiter than white Muslim husband. Hardman, on his side, has planned to skip boat and to end up in London. But the operational deceit will not be running smoothly and the West will leave behind something of itself waiting to be engulfed by that Bigger Far West of Silicon Valley, Hollywood and Wall Street. This is already announced when examining the problems of running a British-type Public School in that far mock outpost of Britishness. To solve the problem of a headmaster of the school, we are told

, *"at times it was thought that an American might be appointed, who, because he would combine the familiar and the exotic and would carry on his breath the magic of the sound track, might arouse in the boys a strong religious devotion. But an American might introduce rounders. Besides, such an appointment would be a complete betrayal of the ideals on which the Mansor School was based, surrender to*

a culture which, however inevitable its global spread, must for as long as possible meet a show of resistance."

This was written in 1955, printed in '56, long before the 1981 of

Midnight's Children

and

The Shame

of 1983, and it is the first time that that incredible comparably small universe teeming with different races and religions is seen from the inside with love and without squalor.

These notes were jotted down towards a longer essay on **The Malayan Trilogy** to be written by

© Liana Burgess (April 14, 1999).

