



VIRTUAL VERANDAH

HOW THE INTERNET HAS BROUGHT ANGLO-INDIANS TOGETHER

Lionel Lumb

If my Uncle Tony, also known as Brigadier Anthony Albert Lumb, were here today he'd say something like this:

“Rotten timing, Lionel. After tiffin Anglo-Indians can't take speeches, they're only good for a spot of charpoy-bashing.”

However, Keith Butler has promised that anyone who dozes off in the next twenty minutes will be banned from the Grand Ball. You've been warned.

I hope you don't mind me taking a personal approach to this topic. Because I am an Anglo-Indian speaking mostly to other Anglo-Indians, I trust you will hear echoes of your own childhood or family circumstances, and that in this way the larger picture gets across.

I really love the chatting-on-the-verandah theme of this conference. For those of us fortunate enough to have grown up in India in what we can't help but recall as the good old days, it's hard to imagine a more Anglo-Indian pastime than chatting on a verandah “after the heat of the day is spent” – I'm quoting now.

“Somewhere in the darkness cattle low, a train shunts, the balmy night air carries the strains of an LP record playing Cherry Pink and Apple...”

Half a mo', as we used to say. LP? In my childhood it would have been an old wax 78 or V-Disc with a scratchy needle, playing Bing Crosby's “Don't Fence Me in.” Guess Keith is younger.

Back to the verandah theme...“and friends stop by.” They'd just drop in. Nobody ever phoned. Many of us didn't have phones, so dropping-in was the only option. That was as true of Anglo-Indians in cities as it was upcountry. There was always a drink,

cold or hot, for everyone; and a spot of pot luck, perhaps some potato chops. Nobody was ever turned away, especially if they had a story to tell. And believe me, in those pre-television days, just about everyone knew how to spin a yarn.

Then the earth tilted and spun us all over the world, tossing us into lands impossible to get to by road or train, lands up to six weeks apart by boat, and even darn near forty hours away by plane cruising close to the speed of sound. Separating friends, families, and the majority of our community from our roots in India.

Then the earth tilted again at the start of '90s – was it really only a decade ago? – and we got back our verandah. A virtual verandah this time on which any of us could drop in and connect, within mere seconds. The Internet has created for us a camaraderie of the Web, spinning us all back into a closer woven cultural community than Anglo-Indians ever were before.

Our roots do matter. We may have taken ourselves out of India but it's far tougher to take India out of us. And what we're discovering as we pull up a *morah* to the computer and chat on this virtual verandah is that there's a lot more to us than we ever suspected. A richer history, greater achievements, more heroes than we ever could imagine as we raced in our Keds on sports days. There are many in this very room who are in the vanguard of this exciting latest voyage of the Anglo-Indian, ever inspiring and lighting beacons along the way. I'll get back to them in a moment.

I have written before that being an Anglo-Indian is a state of mind. As we blend into our new home countries, as our children bloom and grow in the dominant cultures around them, it takes a conscious act of will to hold fast to our roots and acknowledge:

“I am an Australian, or a Canadian, or a New Zealander...but first I am Anglo-Indian.”

Perhaps that realization of exactly who we are has always been tough to acquire. Speaking for myself, when I was a child in Lahore, capital of the Punjab, I had no understanding I was an Anglo-Indian. We were just folks, and folks like us dropped by to sit on the verandah. We played badminton at the church club, took part in the occasional *paga/* gymkhana at the great Burt Institute, attended Mass in the Sacred Heart Cathedral every Sunday, and I went to school next door, where the Irish

Patrician brothers ruled with ruddy, genial faces and slender, wickedly accurate canes.

I guess my loss of innocence came in 1947 when I was nine. Independence and Partition loomed. For weeks crowds had been marching and chanting “Hindustan zindabad, Pakistan murdabad,” or the other way around, depending on which religious group wanted one state to flourish and another to die. That is, when they weren’t chanting “Quit India” slogans to drive out the British.

My father had earlier ensured our Hindu cook and family, and most of the Sikh carpenters who worked in the family business, travelled safely to Amritsar in East Punjab, because it was certain that Lahore would fall to Pakistan when the fateful border was drawn. Now it was our turn. Dad took me with him when he visited police headquarters to find out what emergency plans there might be for Anglo-Indian evacuation, should it become necessary. Thank heaven it never did.

Another time we went and filed papers for our UK citizenship. Not a problem really since my grandfather was English and was living with us in Lahore. Until then, I didn’t know he was different, didn’t know he was English, that my grandmother born in Madras was an Anglo-Indian, that my mother, born in Calcutta, was an Anglo-Indian, that her parents were Anglo-Indians going back to the early 1800s. I’d never even given thought to the servants and the carpenters being different – sure, they didn’t live in the house but in “quarters” along the rear wall of the “compound.” But the adult servants teased and joked with me, fed me and spoiled me, and their kids were my daily playmates.

Winter nights if the sahibs’ talk strayed from rousing yarns to daunting politics, I’d leave the verandah or the drawing room and head out to the side compound, where the servants would be huddling round a fire of twigs and fallen leaves and telling *kahanis*. I’d listen to the stories, perhaps not understanding more than half the Urdu and Punjabi, but enchanted just the same.

Now suddenly the differences were sharply drawn. The Hindu and Sikh servants and workers were gone, only a couple of Muslims stayed. Some of my fellow pupils were leaving St. Anthony’s to go back Home – you could always hear the capital H. They were generally fairer skinned than the rest of us. Yes, I began to notice skin tones for

the first time. One day I studied my arm as it lay alongside that of my friend's, Maurice Field. His looked "cleaner." That's the word I used when I came home that day and told my mother I'd have to start washing better and more often. I can't remember how she handled this, but I guess she found a way to tell me I wasn't dirty, just had a darker skin than Maurice's.

The bloody turmoil of Partition passed and in 1950 we moved to Calcutta, where I spent happy years at St. Xavier's College. I'll stay eternally grateful to St. Xavier's Belgian Jesuits and the lone English priest, Father Dobinson, for the education they gave me; and to Anglo-Indian lay teachers like Ralph Deefholts, who accomplished the superhuman task of helping me understand and enjoy arithmetic and geometry, though he failed with algebra.

Along the way I began to piece together a portrait of Anglo-Indians that wasn't always flattering. I lived in two worlds. In one, my own, we were regular folk, who generally excelled at what we did, were orderly and law-abiding, enjoyed life and were hospitable to a fault. In the other we were despised as lazy, undisciplined, cowardly, immoral, profligate, and unable to better our lot in life. What I didn't know as a teenager was that this distorted portrayal had been in the works for centuries. This depiction was widely used in literature, East India Company reports, "letters home" from travellers, and other published accounts. It sometimes resulted in legislation that restricted Anglo-Indian rights.

At school in Calcutta, studying alongside many Anglo-Indians, I won awards for essay writing and elocution. At home I received an education in Anglo-Indian reality. When we went to Calcutta we lived for a while with an uncle, who had married an Irish woman, a lovely and beloved aunt. Their kids were all fair-skinned. In the pre-monsoon heat of May and June I stayed home while they went off to the Calcutta Swimming Club. "Whites Only." Cousins I could beat at chess and at school lessons, but who could swim where I could not. I swam with friends in a scummy tank in a public park. We tried not to swallow the water because summer often brought cholera to Calcutta.

I don't recall any lasting anguish from this deprivation. But this kind of rejection could scar some for life. My father's mother, Eleanor Taylor, was born in Madras, where

she married her English beau, Charles Norton Lumb. Of her children, three were fair-skinned enough to “pass” for European, and five could not, my father among them. Her eldest was a daughter. Just before my grandmother died in England – she was then in her eighties – she told me how hurt she still was that this daughter had scorned her, and as a young woman would go nowhere with her in Madras. In my Nana’s words:

“She was ashamed her mother was a woman of the country.”

If I suffered at all, it was from the classic adolescent struggle between trying to develop as an individual and at the same time blend in with everyone else. The tight-knit, joyous, life-at-full-tilt Anglo-Indian world of Calcutta offered many delights and comforts. It partly made up for our reduced family circumstances: no more large house and garden, we now lived in a flat. No verandah, no friendly lookout on the world at large.

That adolescent struggle included a major dilemma. The Anglo-Indian Association of Calcutta offered me a university scholarship that included going to England at some point – provided I return as a lawyer for a guaranteed minimum of five years. I already had a job in a large British merchant company and another was almost within my grasp, at *The Statesman*. I turned down the scholarship and spent a happy six years at the newspaper which was the bedrock of my career in journalism. But why say “No” to a golden opportunity? Partly because I didn’t want to be a lawyer, and partly because I wasn’t prepared to lose my individuality within a community that so many around me undervalued.

But *The Statesman* had Anglo-Indians I could hero worship. Chief among these was Mervyn Hardinge, editor of the weekly magazine who also wrote a marvellous column called *Second City* – so called because Calcutta was the second city of the Empire after London. Another was Charles Tresham, a dignified and authoritative figure who became news editor. And then there was Reginald Maher.

Reggie was probably better known in Anglo-Indian circles than any of the others because he started the Anglo-Indian Youth League while still in college, and spent most of his life working with one A-I organization or another. At the newspaper he was a step apart from the newsroom, helping the senior editors (mostly British at the

time) with the editorial pages. He emigrated to Australia in the late '60s but continued to write about A-I affairs until his death in 1998.

The '50s and '60s were traumatic times for Anglo-Indians, especially the younger ones. Hundreds of their family members and friends were leaving India for Britain. The older folk were more certain it was time to leave, that to stay would mean having to face increasing discrimination. The younger were not so sure: after all, unlike our elders, we had Indian friends with whom we went out together, played sports, and found much in common.

But no one could deny the underlying Anglo-Indian fear that we were underrated and even held in contempt for being a hybrid people. Reinforcing this in a powerful way was the seminal Anglo-Indian novel, "Bhowani Junction". When it came out in 1952 its author, John Masters, was condemned for betraying his own people – though it's uncertain he was a true Anglo-Indian – and for reinforcing stereotypes about the community: loose women, bumbling men, a people generally lacking in character and fortitude.

Fifty years later it's hard to convey what an enormous impact the book and the later Hollywood film had on the Anglo-Indian psyche at the time. People talked about little else for weeks and months. It enraged most, caused despair among many, and pleased hardly anyone; even though it was probably the first work of fiction about life in India to feature Anglo-Indians as the main characters – two out of three is not that bad. Even though its heroine, Victoria Jones, is a complex and courageous character, and its other Anglo-Indian, Patrick Taylor, ends in the book – though not in the film – as a hero.

But the morals of the times could not abide the novel's seedier sexual aspects. When I read it back in the '50s, I recall admiring Victoria Jones's guts. But it was hard not to be swamped by the tidal wave of revulsion. Until then, I hadn't realized that Anglo-Indians were seen – or saw themselves – as helpless and confused, caught between two cultures; as both denigrated by others and often filled with self-contempt. I heard my normally confident businessman of a father use for the first time the phrase, "...neither fish nor fowl."

Reggie Maher decided to counter the myths and tilt at the windmills that fanned

ignorant propaganda against the community. He began working on a book that was published in 1962, "These Are the Anglo-Indians". What a joy to learn it was re-published here in Australia by Print West, in Perth, in 1995.

The book is really an extended essay. It's just over a hundred pages, but every sentence counts. In it, Reggie traces how generations of what he calls "stink ink" stained and befouled our mixed-race community. To quote just one of the stinkers, a distinguished British scientist from Malaya, H. N. Ridley: "Taking the race as a whole they are weak in body, short-lived, deficient in energy and feeble in morals...Even a little admixture of native blood seems to result in an individual who possesses the bad qualities of both races."

Reggie Maher put paid to these and other vilifications with thoughtful arguments and a compilation of Anglo-Indian achievements and heroes. As he pointed out, it's quite remarkable that a tiny community of about 350,000 – a mere drop in the ocean of the giant Indian population of 350 million at the time of independence – could have ridden so high on the waves. Could have produced so many "firsts," so many distinguished civil servants, soldiers and civilians. In Calcutta he showed me a paper he presented to UNESCO, I believe, in which he even tackled the question of hybridity and its essential strengths. In that paper – as well as in his book – he pointed out that Anglo-Indians cross all racial, colour and physical backgrounds. In his opinion, we are the first true world citizens with, as he wrote, "kinsmen among the peoples of most nations." We're also gifted with the world's largest mother tongue, and a record of survival and adaptability that many would envy.

Somewhat prophetically, he looked ahead to today's immigrant patterns and predicted we would prove "the prototype of the international people that will make the world's population if the trend towards the universal brotherhood of man continues." This was a man writing well before this country eased its White Australia policy in 1966 which allowed Anglo-Indians to find a home here. And before Canada – which never had such a policy but whose early immigrants came mainly from Europe or the United States – brought in legislation in 1967 that opened up its immigration more fairly to people from all parts of the world. Canada is sometimes described as the most multicultural country in the world. There, inter-marriage between different races and ethnic groups is blurring racial differences in an ever-increasing way. Perhaps

that's true in Australia as well.

How nice for Anglo-Indians to be able to say: "We were there first."

So today I salute the memory of Reggie Maher, Anglo-Indian hero. Were he still writing today, he could compile a new list of heroes for our community: the heroes of the Internet, whose deeds are no less valorous for being virtual.

Heroes like Adrian Gilbert, who in 1996 launched the pioneering Anglo-Indian Home Page, with its twin projects: the International Journal of Anglo-Indian Studies and the Wallah, the former scholarly in content, and the latter a collection of lively articles and fiction. Together they offer a growing cornucopia of writing about Anglo-Indian issues, history and aspirations. Regular contributors include Gloria Jean Moore, Esther Mary Lyons, Glenn D'Cruz, and Keith Butler (Australia); Ann Lobo and Alison Blunt (England); Blair Williams and Roy Dean Wright (USA); Margaret Stuart Mills (Canada). Other Canadian contributors include writers Margaret Deefholts and Lynne Rebeiro and the scholar, Evelyn Abel. And a thoughtful Anglo-Indian scholar at the University of Hawaii, Kathleen Cassity, has taken a remarkable second look at the novel Bhowani Junction that reveals how the passage of time can allow for more dispassionate judgment. Of course, there are many others – I hope they'll pardon me for not mentioning them here because of time constraints.

Then there's Bert Payne from America, a tireless compiler of Anglo-Indian publications, lore, research tips, and museum links whose Web site – like Adrian Gilbert's – is an essential main station on Anglo-Indians' journey to learning more about the community's history, traditions and future.

One of the most valuable contributions of all has come from the Canada-based newsletter, "Anglo-Indians in Touch", edited from its beginnings in 1982 by Merv Gaynor, then from 1996 by Eric Peters and from this year by Lynne Rebeiro. In 1992 in Toronto, AIIT organized and hosted the second world reunion and symposium, a highly successful event. AIIT has no Web site but its snail mail newsletter is a treasure.

Anglo-Indians were among the first to realize the potential of the Web. Their hundreds of sites, dot-joined to so many parts of the world, connect our Anglo-Indian

Diaspora like the community's pioneering work on the railways and telegraph systems of India first connected the sub-continent's pulsating cities and remote whistle-stops.

These represent far more than nostalgia sites for people hungry for recipes or information about distant friends. They reveal a community eager for knowledge of itself, enjoying a rebirth that ensures its culture will at last establish its uniqueness beyond all challenge.

It is this flowering of research and literature which will repudiate the stink merchants of the past. And the more recent stereotype creators like Ismail Merchant and his pathetic film, "*Cotton Mary*;" Michael Korda with his despicable novel "*Queenie*" and the almost risible television series it spawned; and the British producers of "*The Peacock Summer*," whose mini-series bastardized the intent of its fine writer, Rumer Godden.

Most of all, these sites give the lie to that influential intellectual and writer so admired in Britain, Nirad C. Chaudhuri, who dismissed us cruelly in his book, "*The Continent of Circe*". It hurts all the more that someone of such prodigious talent should hold such a low and flawed opinion of Anglo-Indians. He wrote that the community produced only one person of merit, the poet and thinker, Henry Derozio.

Chaudhuri also wrote that any group which produced no literature of its own could never amount to anything. Were he alive today he would learn the depth of his calumny and have to swallow a mountain of humble pie.

Yet Chaudhuri was right about one point. It is vital for any community to have a literature of its own, as much to set straight the twisted record of the past, as to illuminate the future. As Adrian Gilbert wrote in his introduction to the January 2002 Symposium held here in Melbourne:

"We have a rich colourful history and have achieved at every level of society for hundreds of years, but that record of achievement has in most cases been hidden, passed over or co-opted by the British or Indians. For us to be recognised we must start to represent ourselves at every level. Our histories have to be written by Anglo-Indians, social research must be conducted by Anglo-Indians, fictional accounts must be written by Anglo-Indians. Without this we can never be certain that

we are fairly represented.”

Yes, indeed. Every symposium like this, and that plethora of flourishing Web sites, together underscore just how well we're doing at appreciating the merits of our past and ensuring glories yet to come.

One last point. After fifty-one years without a verandah, my wife Shirley and I added one to our house a couple of years ago. Drop in any time.

Thank you.