Her Old Ayah: The Transcolonial Significance of the Indian Domestic Worker in India and Australia

Victoria Haskins

The historical representation of white women in India and Australia bears a striking similarity: on the one hand, we find the ‘memsahib’ and, on the other, the ‘missus’, with both of them designated by their role not only of wife and mother to white men, but as mistress to native workers. In the case of the former, this designation as mistress is paramount, for, in the nostalgic construction of the British Raj, perhaps no one figure looms quite so large as the cherished ayah or lady’s maid. This paper is a rumination on the significance of this image of the Indian domestic worker in imagined women’s relationships of (Anglophone) colonialism. Sparked by the recollections of my Australian-born great-grandmother, Joan Kingsley-Strack, reflecting on the life of her Anglo-Indian grandmother, Maggie Hobbes (and in her case the term ‘Anglo-Indian’ is fittingly ambiguous), my discussion tentatively traces the constitution of an ideology of white colonial womanhood, through the systems of circulation of cultural ideas and attitudes that emerged in Anglophone colonialism. In a transcolonial culture, the figure of the ayah was significant, in a way that the very banality of the women’s work she performed tends to obscure.

The domestic frontier in Australia

In the settler-colonial nation of Australia, domestic service, as a site of colonialism – a frontier of colonisation – became an arena for state intervention and manipulation in the twentieth century. Relationships between indigenous and white women were created in this crucible in interwar Australia, as the state (literally, state governments of the former colonies) forcibly and systematically removed young Aboriginal women from their families and communities and indentured them as household servants. They were almost always placed in the homes of married white women with young children, and many of those homes were in the newly emerging suburbs of Australian cities (Haskins 2005).
Such policies were carried out with the aim of breaking up persistent Aboriginal communities in south-eastern Australia, while in areas where white settlement was sparse, the policies targeted mixed-descent girls especially, there being a concern that unless they did so a dangerous ‘hybrid race’ in the centre and northern regions would eventually emerge. The participation of white women as employers was crucial to the success of this project, providing their homes as the locale for a policy of dispersal (Haskins 2004). While there was a persistent servant shortage in urban areas (Walden 1995: 196), the decision of a privileged white urban woman to engage an unknown Aboriginal girl as a servant, most commonly as a nursemaid, was indeed remarkable, considering not only the racism of the times, but the Board’s public justification of its policy on the grounds that the girls came from ‘contaminating’ and ‘vicious’ communities, and were inherently immoral.

That a number of such women (admittedly a small number) could and did take Aboriginal girls into their homes reflects the ubiquity of what art historian Madeline McGuire has called the ‘good fella missus legend’ (1990: 135-139). This ‘dominant historical myth about the relation between white women and Aborigines [that] portrays the former as kind mistresses and the latter as objects of their maternal care’ (McGuire 1990: 124) was an integral strand of a popular mythologising of pioneer and frontier life that held sway in middle-class urban Australian culture throughout the Board’s regime. Its classic expression was found in the immensely popular writings of Mrs Aeneas Gunn, who described her relationship with the Aboriginal women workers of Elsey Station in the Northern Territory thus:

They knew as well as I did that, as long as the work was well done, I would let them play over it as much as they liked. You see, I was what white people would call a ‘bad mistress;’ but the blacks called me ‘goodfellow missus,’ and would do anything I wanted without a murmur (Gunn 1924: 40).

An index of class status ascribing an honourable, indeed, virtuous role to white women who utilised the cheap labour of those whose land they had appropriated, a desire to cast themselves in such a light underpinned the willingness of women like my great-grandmother Joan Kingsley-Strack to engage Aboriginal apprentices through the Protection Board. Studies of the imagined relationships between white women and Aboriginal people have tended to focus inwards, mirroring the nationalistic thrust of such constructions (see, in addition to McGuire 1990: Godden 1979; Grimshaw & Evans 1996; Vivers 2002). However, with a reorientation of Australian studies of colonialism directing our attention toward transnational influences (for instance,
Woollacott 2003; Grimshaw & Standish 2007) it might be suggested that the fashionable image of the white mistress was in fact a wider, transcolonial construction, created in the Raj and reworked in other colonial contexts – including Australia.

‘Mrs Anglomaniac’: transporting the Raj

By the late nineteenth century, the relationship between the ‘memsahib’ and the Indian servant who was her foil was recognised throughout the Anglophone world as a symbol of British rule. A telling ‘joke’ was published in an 1888 newspaper produced by and for the Native American students of Carlisle School in Pennsylvania, Massachusetts. This school was originally established to cater to prisoners-of-war during the western plains wars, and subsequently started up the so-called Outing System under which young American ‘Indian’ girls were placed in domestic service indentures. The gag runs so:

Must be English. Mrs Anglomaniac – I see you advertise to furnish servants of any nationality.
Employment agent – Yes: madam, no matter what. If we haven’t ’em on hand we’ll get ’em.
Mrs Anglomaniac – Very well. I see by the Court Journal that Queen Victoria is using Indian servants, and I want some nice, tidy squaws, right away.

Offering an illustration of Tony Ballantyne’s point in his study of Orientalism in the British Empire, notwithstanding the emphasis on the metropole, the joke reminds us of the need to ‘foreground the relational quality of the imperial past’, focusing on imperial networks and cultural exchange patterns to elucidate the integrative power of empire and the indigenising forces that worked to adapt introduced ideas to local imperatives (Ballantyne 2002: 2-3, 14-15).

We might note, indeed, that the Australian impulse to support aggressive intervention by the state over Aboriginal lives in the 1920s and 1930s was directly connected to what contemporary Australians conceived to be the British way in India. When the NSW Aborigines Protection Board presented its 1925 report to Parliament newspaper coverage reported that the ‘problem’ was the ‘future of the half-caste race’:

The same difficulty is encountered in other countries under British rule. In India, despite every effort, the half-caste remains as an unassimilable section of the community. It has to be remem-
bered that the Indian half-caste is for the most part a higher type than the Australian. Many of the half-caste women of Hindustan have exhibited talent of an advanced order to which they add a certain personal charm, which is not always noticeable in other half-caste races. In Australia, the half-castes are the product of an aboriginal mother, wholly untutored, and but little removed from barbaric races (Maynard 2007: 80).4

Let us not forget that the British first introduced the very term ‘half-caste’ in India, back in 1789. A derogatory term for mixed-race children of European and Indian unions designed to begin the long process of social exclusion of such hybrid people (Edwards 2003), it was to have a longstanding and poisonous impact in Australia.

From the turn of the twentieth century mixed-descent people in Australia were a source of great and increasing anxiety to the authorities; while there was no place imagined for Aboriginal people in ‘White Australia’ (it being assumed their extinction was inevitable) the vitality of Aboriginal communities was attributed to the ‘white blood’ within them but they remained ‘unassimilable’. ‘It is a danger to us’ one NSW Board member and parliamentarian warned in 1915, ‘to have a people like that among us, looking upon our institutions with eyes different from ours’. Such fears drove the impulse to go into Aboriginal communities and take out the girls and women of child-bearing age, to be placed in service.5

Today, the live-in, indentured or bonded domestic worker is typically a ‘foreign worker’ rather than a ‘native’. Nevertheless a pattern set in the colonial period persists. Native female domestic workers were almost always in some sense ‘colonial hybrids’ themselves, individuals who both culturally and racially straddled the divide between coloniser and colonised, often drastically and even violently displaced from their native communities of origin, and occupying a vulnerable yet dangerous liminal status in the colonial world. Nupur Chaudhuri’s study of white women’s attitudes toward Indian servants found that ‘many’ preferred Christian *ayahs*. However, they also considered ‘converts’ untrustworthy, and that these Christian servants were descendants of the Portuguese, Indians and Catholics meant that they were also viewed with distrust by the predominantly Protestant British (1994: 552). The classic example from the colonial period is the 1860s *ayah* Anna de Souza, a Goan Christian from Calcutta, who in giving us one of the few recorded voices of an *ayah*, reveals that she was keenly aware that she had no family of her own (Prasad 2003: 12, 18). Then as now, however, the workers’ role was more than just the performance of reproductive labour. As the symbol of domesticated Otherness they served to define racial, cultural and class borders and to indeed, affirm the integ-
She was born in India: creating Maggie Hobbes

So, by the early twentieth century, the figure of the native nursemaid was a crucial signifier of status in a transcolonial world, where identities that might be traced to colonial origins were often unstable, fractured, and subject to sudden reversals. Margaret Ann Hobbes née Goldie, the grandmother of my great-grandmother Joan Strack, would serve as a model ‘little Missus’ for her granddaughter Joan Strack in Joan’s relations with Aboriginal people in the 1920s and 1930s. Joan Kingsley-Strack employed a series of young Aboriginal women as servants through the Aborigines Protection Board in the 1920s and 1930s and in her doing so, she consciously modelled her behaviour on her own great-grandmother, who had used the domestic labour of women from the Aboriginal camp adjacent to her selection on the Far South Coast of NSW in the nineteenth century. Maggie Hobbs ‘mothered nursed and cared for the Aboriginal men women and babes ... she fed and clothed them until they came to look upon her as their own “little Missus”’ wrote my great-grandmother, as Maggie lay on her deathbed in 1934.6 This was the panegyric of obituary, but in a letter written around the same time, reflecting on her grandmother’s life, Joan Strack touched on her exotic colonial origins:

Gran was a very beautiful and proud Scotch girl (her father was ... Commodore of the Brit. East India Clipper fleet). She was born in India and sent at an early age back to Scotland with her Ayah. She had never ‘worked’ in her life, but did most exquisite embroidery and artistic work of all kinds...7

In this account, the native ayah functions as a potent signifier of Maggie’s class and race (and, by extension, her descendants’), the link between the two clauses, ‘she was sent back with her Ayah’ and ‘she never worked in her life’ makes this even more clear. And importantly, the ayah also functioned as a link between Maggie’s ‘imperial’ position in India and her colonial role in Australia, as the loving mistress of servants, and again, by extension, the position of her granddaughter Joan. Thus, in a manuscript Joan crafted, which she hoped (in vain, as it turned out) to have published as a series of Aboriginal legends for children, Joan wrote that her grandmother had a ‘a carved Indian box’ that ‘had been given to her by her old Ayah for she was born in India many years ago’. This box became a rhetorical device to launch into a recol-
lection both of her own childhood relationships with the Aboriginal people on her grandparents’ property, as she and a few Aboriginal friends pored through the box for treasures on a rainy day, and her relationship with her grandmother’s Aboriginal maid, the ‘Queen’ of the local tribe, who brought them ‘hot scones, Brownie, sweets and glasses of milk all round’.8

Joan’s wistful evocations of her grandmother’s Indian childhood do not, however, totally agree with Maggie’s own account. For Maggie asserted she was brought from her Scottish birthplace to India by her mother, at four months of age, leaving behind an older brother and rather incredibly, surviving a shipwreck and several days in a small boat at sea, to meet her father. Her earliest memories, moreover, were of Singapore, where her maternal grandfather was harbour master, and where two younger sisters were born in quick succession. At about the age of four, according to Maggie, she was returned to her mother’s family in Scotland and soon left orphaned, her father having died of cholera (en route to Russia) and her mother of longstanding childbirth complications. As her mother’s family was not ‘kind’, at the age of seventeen, Maggie and her next youngest sister ‘ran away’ on an assisted passage to the Australian colonies, where more maternal relatives lived. Having listed their occupations as ‘nursery governess’, Maggie found work as a governess in Sydney, in the process meeting and fairly quickly – as was the way in the colonies – marrying an English widower. She raised his children, and another eight of her own, on land selected by her husband and sons on the far southern coast of NSW.9

Though Maggie had been in India only briefly, potent mythologies of empire suffused Joan’s depiction of her return to her ancestral home with a loving ayah. Maggie’s position as a young, poor and unattached Highlander woman looking for work was precarious. Upper-class English emigrant Amy Henning in her seaboard journal written onboard the Calcutta from England to Australia in 1854 described meeting a ‘Mrs MacDonald’, ‘quite a lady,’ who had ‘been in India a great part of her life’ and knew various friends of the Hennings, thus cementing her equivalent status. She was going to Australia to meet her husband who had had to give up his Indian appointment ‘from bad health’ and had been seeking his fortune in Australia for the past two years. However, Hennings’ editor writes that ‘the unfortunate’ Mrs MacDonald had, in fact, been abandoned by her husband, and ‘As a result of his rejection of her, on her arrival in Sydney she was reduced to taking a position as a governess …’ (Thomas 1984: 82, 88). Mrs MacDonald’s predicament reveals the dangers that awaited Maggie Hobbs. Arriving in 1858, Maggie came just at the start of an influx of some 90,000 single British women to the Australian colonies in the second half of the nineteenth century (Gothard 2001: 2). Single women emigrating on as-
sisted passages to Australia in the 1850s primarily to supply the need for domestic workers (these included women brought from the Scottish Highlands to alleviate poverty there) were treated with a discernible anxiety by the authorities and respectable society in general who subjected them to rigorous moral scrutiny (see Gothard 1991; also Gothard 2001: 3). In fact, not long before Maggie’s arrival, some of the women sent out to colonies ‘under the auspices of the Highland and Island Emigration Society had been rejected by the colonists because of the extreme poverty of their background and their total inexperience in domestic service’ (Gothard 2001: 45). Cautionary tales advising single emigrant women of the need for appropriate behaviour circulated, such as ex-Indian army officer Charles Mundy’s account, published in 1852, of the downfall of ‘two young orphan girls, little more than children, daughter of a respectable professional man, [who] came out from England’ with the ‘ostensible object [of] procure[ing] situations as nursery governesses’ but the real aim of finding marriage, ‘soon began to show such levity of manner as to forfeit the protection of [their] kind patrons’ and their downfall was ‘predictable’. ‘... And these were emigrants at the cost of the territorial revenue of the colony!’ (Baker 2006: 180-181). A socially ambiguous position for an unmarried woman in British society (Gathorne-Hardy 1972: 71) it was even more so in the colonies (Higman 2002: 9). Would-be governesses dominated the female job seekers in Sydney between the 1850s and the 1870s, and they could not easily resist the pressures to take on a wider range of more menial domestic duties (Higman 2002: 149, 150; Daniels & Murnane 1980: 237-238): Maggie could well have ended up as a servant herself. In this situation, emphasising her Raj origins was a way of identifying her inclusion in the colonial elite.

The ayah played an important role as a foil not only of class, but of race – and for Maggie, arriving in the Australian colonies not twelve months after the Indian Mutiny of 1857 (as it was then called by the British), perhaps more significantly. It had not been uncommon in the earlier colonial period for British men in India to call upon their British wives or female relatives to take on responsibility for their children born to Indian women, and even later into the nineteenth century when attitudes to mixed-descent children were less hostile in England than in India. Rosemary Raza, for instance, writes of the acceptance of ‘the Eurasian children who arrived [from India] in the Highlands’ in the late 1700s, where ‘illegitimacy was prevalent at all levels of society’, but noted the ‘deepening prejudice’ in India since the 1820s against ‘half-castes’ (2006: 78; see also Brendon 2006: 41-67; Ghosh 2006: 100-105, 125). Whether or not orphaned Maggie and her sister had Indian ancestry, in the gossip-ridden and prejudiced colonial society of NSW we may be sure that many would have thought so. (As Kirsten
McKenzie [2004] shows, while colonial societies offered opportunities to British settlers for re-invention that they exploited with a vengeance, scandal was never far behind.) A faded photographic portrait of a pensive young Maggie reveals, above a tartan neck bow and stiff Victorian bodice, her olive skin and dark hair and eyes. In 1866, Maggie’s husband in his diary recorded that his ‘dear wife’ had been ‘most grossly insulted and treated most cruelly’ by one of his sisters:

I was very sorry and greatly grieved for her sake, she, who does her duty so nobly and works so hard for the children, to be treated by people so much inferior to her in every thing, except perhaps, in having a greater share of money in their pockets. There is much need for me to be very kind indeed to her, more so indeed than I am, to make amends for the cruel deficiency exhibited by the rest of my family may they be forgiven, I cannot do it.\(^\text{10}\)

While her husband did not reveal the nature of the insult, such was her sisters-in-law’s hostility that they would not even offer their condolences when the couple’s first-born child died in an accident as a baby.\(^\text{11}\) It may well be that for Maggie herself as well as her own female relatives in the colony playing up her position as a blue-blooded Scottish daughter of the Raj was strategic. Considering the numbers of women migrants coming to Australia with similar fragments of colonial experience, we might hazard a guess that the class and race-defining role served in the figure of the native nurse was more generally more prominent than actual experience warranted.

Chaudhuri quotes a white mistress who wrote, when Maggie was one year old and by her account had just arrived in India, that ‘If my child were to stay long in this country, it would be worthwhile to send for an English nurse, but as it is, I hope to bring her home before it becomes of any consequence and meanwhile I keep her as much as possible with me’ (1994: 552). British wives were expected to send their children away or leave their husbands in India when the children came of an age to require education ‘back Home’. Thus we might – conceivably – justify the decision of Maggie’s mother to leave her young son in Scotland but bring her newborn daughter with her to India to join her husband, and again, her decision to go back when Maggie was about four or five years old in 1844. According to a recent historian of Bengali domestic service, Swapna Banerjee, during the British colonial period, Indian domestics were sometimes taken back to Britain but she suggests that this was not typical: ‘Some of [the British] even took back to England their ‘faithful’ Indian domestics’ (2004: 53-64). Perhaps, Maggie’s mother was indeed very attached to her children’s caretaker.
However, it is intriguing that, despite Maggie later telling her descendants she was born in Scotland, she had actually given her birthplace as Singapore on her Australian shipping record. Had Maggie’s ostensible mother collected Maggie (and perhaps her sisters too) upon voyaging to South-East Asia to join her husband? Could Maggie’s *ayah* have been, indeed, her biological mother?

Maggie never mentions the *ayah* in her own few surviving written accounts; and after Maggie’s prodigal return to Scotland the woman fades from the scene altogether in Joan’s stories. I suspect that, whether she was Maggie’s nurse or mother, the *ayah* did not, in fact, return to Scotland, but this was an embellishment that Maggie’s granddaughter could not resist.

**Changing attitudes: Native nursemaids in India and Australia**

By the 1930s the image of a cherished *ayah* had been enshrined in the nostalgia of the Raj that was generated at the close of the nineteenth century. As that image took on a life of its own, individual recollections of British colonials were compressed and compelled into the one abiding memory, as Margaret MacMillan put it, of ‘a much-loved *ayah*, usually a small, plump woman with gleaming, oiled hair, dressed in a white sari, who had sung to them, comforted them, and told them wonderful Indian stories’ (1998: 137).

The *ayah*, the lady’s maid, was very likely the only female servant in a British home, but her presence had become ubiquitous in the nineteenth century, with even lower-class British women in India (i.e., soldier’s wives) likely to have had an *ayah* to assist them (Procida 2003: 127-128, 146). In 1828, a doctor dispensing advice to young British mothers arriving in India declared ‘native nurses’ to be a great danger. He was at pains to explain that their object was to make money and make ‘ingratitude’ their invariable stance: ‘I have known ladies to bestow on them repeated presents of clothes and money, to induce them to be kind to their infants, but without avail; kindness, in fact, seemed to induce, in many of them, impudence and threats, for the purpose of exaction’, he warned (Fildes 1988: 204-205). The appearance of an etching showing an ‘Ayah stealing a child’ at this time suggests a complex of fears about the dependence of white women on Indian childcare. At this time, the native female servant was in fact destabilising social boundaries. By the twentieth century, however, the *ayah*’s function had fundamentally shifted, from necessary evil to status symbol for a beloved white wife. Now the *memsahib* was explicitly exhorted to take on an *ayah*, even if she had no young children. ‘Chota Mem’ –
linguistically the Raj equivalent of the ‘Little Missus’ – told her readers in 1909:

[I] was always very glad my husband insisted that I should have one. The ayah is a most useful servant and if she is willing and clever will be a tremendous help to you, and you must own it is nice to have one woman in the house. It is such a comfort when you come in hot and tired... (Blunt 1999: 432).

The ayah’s significance as a female at this time had become heightened in a way unlike that of earlier generations. Steel and Gardiner, those custodians of correct female behaviour in India, advised their readers to treat the ayah ‘with consideration and respect’, being ‘the only woman-servant in the house’; both they and a writer in the early 1920s advised that the memsahib should demonstrate she held her ayah ‘equal’ to the other servants ‘whether she be a sweeper or not’ (Blunt 1999: 432).

As ideas about uplifting downtrodden Indian women infiltrated the domestic service relationship, the paranoia expressed about native wet-nurses in the 1820s gave way to the admonitions against ‘race prejudice’ evident in the now apparently ‘universal horror of wet-nurses’ in India. ‘[If] the Western woman is unable to fulfil her first duty to her child, let her thank Heaven for the gift of any one able to do that duty for her’, Steel and Gardiner stated (Blunt 1999: 433).

The ayah’s role as caretaker of the older children was still hazardous, however. Steel and Gardiner themselves argued that an ayah should help care for infants but young children were better cared for by an English nurse, whose superiority in ‘upbringing and nice ways, knowledge, and trustworthiness’ was assumed. ‘The Indian ayah has many good points; she surrounds her charges with an atmosphere of love and devotion and has infinite patience,’ another writer conceded in 1923:

They make a charming picture – the fair-haired English child and the swarthy-faced ayah with her voluminous white draperies, tinkling silver bangles, and gay scarlet coat, as she sits soothing him with magnetic touch, crooning an old-world lullaby...

But, she warned, ‘children left to the care and companionship of native servants run a serious risk of acquiring bad habits, of becoming unmannerly, and of developing in undesirable ways’. Interestingly, the same writer was also critical of the practice of engaging orphanage girls as nursemaids, underlining their unsuitability whether mixed-des-
cent or of ‘pure English extraction’, because of their ‘infectious’ Eurasian accent. A ‘judicious English nurse or governess’ was needed to train the older children of the British elite (Blunt 1999: 433-435). The ayah becomes essentially a picturesque foil to the young white child, underlining, not threatening, the inviolability of her mistress’s race and class.

Meanwhile, in Australia, white women were being called upon to ‘uplift’ Aboriginal girls by taking them into their homes, where they tended to the care of pre-school aged children and babies. As in India, there had been a significant shift in the way that relationships were imagined between white and Aboriginal women. In the 1850s, one Emma McPherson published her account of a Lady’s travels in the colonies in which she stated she ‘been told, that the native women make kind and careful nurses to European children’ but she did not have the confidence to trust them out of sight. She did archly admit to ‘get[ting] one of the young girls to carry [the baby] for me when I went out for a stroll, or to walk up and down the veranda with him awhile I sat at work, and very glad I was of such assistance, for nursing in hot weather is a somewhat fatiguing business’. The girl had to first ‘bathe in the river’ and put on ‘a frock’ she kept for such occasions, before she ‘allow[ed] her to touch my wee one’ (1860: 230-231). Emma McPherson and her husband both had Indian backgrounds; their son, also, would join the Indian civil service in the late nineteenth century.13 Throughout the nineteenth century the requirements of white feminine gentility was transported to the colonies by such women (Russell 1994), which meant there was a noticeable preference for mixed-descent, fairer-skinned women to work as servants. Mrs Gunn’s young live-in worker Bett-Bett, for instance, was the daughter of a white man (Ellinghaus 1997: 85). Atlanta Bradshaw relied on the assistance of another abandoned daughter of a white man for the care of her children in late-nineteenth-century central Australia, insisting that her other ‘house-girls’ left their specially made white uniforms back at the house when they went back to their camp and ‘slept with their beloved dogs’ (De Vries 2005: 119-120, 123). In the twentieth century, however, the striking yet familiar depiction of the picturesque ayah would be echoed in a series of portraits of demure dark-skinned Aboriginal women in white aprons, produced by government administrative ‘Protection’ boards to circulate amongst prospective white employers, and to promote the policy of indenturing Aboriginal girls and women.
Her old ayah: colonialist nostalgia and identity

In my book *One Bright Spot* I have written about Joan Strack’s story and touched upon her grandmother, but did not elaborate on the significance Joan invested in the stories of her grandmother’s Indian childhood and an *ayah* who accompanied her young mistress back to Scotland before fading from the scene altogether. But there, amongst Joan’s many photographs of her beloved Aboriginal servant, Mary (apprenticed to her between the years 1920 and 1926 under the terms and conditions established by the Aborigines Protection Board), is a creased and unidentified sepia shot of a small nineteenth-century white child – sex indeterminate – with a sari-clad *ayah*. I have no idea who the child or woman are, nor when the little photograph was taken, but I can be sure that this anonymous image was treasured as a memento of colonialist nostalgia that helped Ming to identify and locate her own experience in a familial web of empire.

There is a well-established, even classic tri-generational genesis of the ‘good fella missus’ ideal: from the ‘sterling mother’ (the British emigrant) to the ‘Australia’s daughter’ (born in the bush), and then finally, the ‘modern urban woman’ (McGuire 1990: 143). In this persuasive paradigm, my great-grandmother Joan Strack can be depicted as the third generation and her grandmother Maggie as the first. But the elusive and provocative wisps of story that point to the Indian connection suggest that the imagined relationships between white women and ‘natives’ in Australia were constructions of a larger transcolonial network of women’s lives. Maya Jasanoff (2005) writes of the plethora of exotic items, transported around the world by colonial travellers before 1850, that helped to fashion a collective mythology of empire. Just as I suspect that in reality no *ayah* actually accompanied young Maggie back to Scotland, I am rather sceptical of my grandmother’s story about a carved Indian box of treasures, given to Maggie by her ‘old Ayah’ many years ago. Yet, if it did exist, it surely was an instance of the imperial mania for collecting. Certainly as a metaphor for an imaginary idea of colonialism transported from colony to colony, the carved Indian box signifying a gift of native devotion certainly evokes the way that cultural ideas were transported around the webs of Empire. In the travels of women like Maggie Hobbes, the image of the loving *ayah* they carried with them fundamentally shaped our understandings of white womanhood in colonialism.
Notes

1 This essay was originally presented as a conference paper at the ICAS5, Kuala Lumpur, under the title, ‘Memshib and Missus: transcolonial constructions of the white mistress in India and Australia’. A version of this paper, under the same title, appears in the *Journal of the Oriental Society of Australia* (forthcoming, 2009).


3 *The Red Man* vol. VIII, October 1888, no. 11, 6.


5 Robert Scobie, *NSW Parliamentary Debates*, 27 January 1915, vol. 37, p. 1965. It should be noted, however, that Scobie himself argued against instituting the tactic of child removal.


7 Joan Kingsley-Strack to [Brian Penton], undated, c. 1934: series 1 (11), Joan Kingsley-Strack Papers MS 9551, National Library of Australia.


9 From a letter by Margaret Hobbes (nee Goldie), n.d., to one of her children (original in possession of Joan Strack’s cousin Jenny Carter), transcribed by Joan Kingsley-Strack, Sydney 1957: Series 9 (1), Joan Kingsley-Strack Papers MS 9551.

10 John Thomas Hobbes diary, 22 May 1866, personal possession of Peter Haskins.

11 John Thomas Hobbes diary, 22 May 1866, personal possession of Peter Haskins.


13 I am indebted to Stephen Foster for this information.