**An Island of Whiteness: Rereading Penelope Lively’s *Oleander, Jacaranda* (1994)**

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When the year’s Booker Prize nominees were announced in September 1987, Penelope Lively’s nomination for her third novel *Moon Tiger* was met with patronising derision in some quarters of the UK press. Itwas dismissed as the ‘housewife’s choice’ (‘Penelope Lively’s Life’ np) and the work of an author who wrote for ‘the Harrods and Hatchard’s market’ (Webb np). Even the coverage of *Moon Tiger*’s later win was dominated by the suspicion that ‘there is something too sheltered’ in Lively’s work (Perrick np) and, more unfairly, that her writings did ‘nothing to enlarge the sense of the possible for the novel’ (Webb np). Implicit within these gendered criticisms is the suggestion that Lively’s writings, which are often concerned with their characters’ interior lives, do little to expand or develop our view of the world. In order to sustain this dismissal, reviewers strategically overlooked *Moon Tiger*’s complex, non-linear narrative structure, which assembles a kaleidoscopic vision of an entire life through fragments and memories. With several key exceptions (Hurley Moran, Strongman, Marsh), Lively’s writings have historically been marginalised within public and academic discussions alike, sidelined as part and parcel of ‘the domestic proficiencies of English fiction’ and unworthy of serious scrutiny (Birch np).

Yet rather than confining or limiting her work, the ‘domestic proficiencies’ of Lively’s writing frequently offer precise and scathing social commentaries. Furthermore, Lively's focus on the minutiae of daily life and domesticity — particularly within her five experimental memoirs —

have consistently revealed how private and public life in modern Britain is underwritten by the narratives of Empire. Britain’s colonial past seeps into the mundane, everyday aspects of Lively’s autobiographical writings, lurking in photograph albums and the furnishings of family homes. Lively’s memoirs include: an account of childhood *Oleander, Jacaranda* (1994), an exploration of her family home Golsoncott in *A House Unlocked* (2001), a collection of speculative life narratives *Making It Up* (2005), essays on old age in *Ammonites and Leaping Fish* (2013) and the horticultural memoir *Life in the Garden* (2018). Each recalls her colonial childhood in Egypt during the 1930s, her departure from the country in the midst of the Second World War and the realisation that she was, in 1940s Britain, an alien ‘in this place that was apparently the homeland’ (2001 162). I read her life writing as indexing a particular moment of post-imperial arrival in the UK, describing Lively as an unfamiliar stranger in the country that she had been raised to consider her own.

While these memoirs cover various aspects of Lively's long life and career, *Oleander Jacaranda* is solely focussed on her childhood in Egypt, outlining the experience of being ‘raised on the fringes of Africa’ (75) with vivid intensity*.* It recounts Lively’s upbringing in the country from 1933 to 1945, a period punctuated only by brief sojourns in Palestine and Sudan. Living in a grand house known as Bulaq Dakhrur on the outskirts of Cairo, she explains that, as a Protectorate of the British Empire, Cairo’s government offices were ‘manned by Egyptians’ but behind each local representative ‘stood a British official’ (21). Her father worked for the National Bank of Egypt, upholding the country’s ‘precarious system of foreign administration’ (22). However, by the early 1940s, the ‘disquieting offstage rumble of war’ (58) had began to disrupt family life. On hearing the rumours that General Rommel had earmarked their home as his own headquarters, Lively’s parents joked that at least ‘our dogs would be well-treated because they were dachshunds’ (58). Later Lively would view the acceptance of British informal rule in Egypt, and her family’s conviction that Cairo could not fall to the advancing German army, ‘as a manifestation of imperial confidence’ (59). Behind her mother’s cocktail hours and grand afternoon tea parties was the staunch belief that ‘not only could the sun never set on the Empire, but it was inconceivable that it would ever do so’ (59) .

Although, in retrospect, Lively looks back in astonishment, at her childhood self playing peacefully ‘while the Middle East roared around her’ (147), her memoircharts the subjective and disorientating experience of growing up ‘English in Egypt’ (vii). Understanding that Egypt was her home, Lively also ‘realised that in some perverse way I was not truly a part of it’ (17). Instead she became aware that her Englishness ‘in some mysterious way hitched [me] up to this distant and inconceivable place of which I knew so little’ (18). When she did finally arrive in Britain, shortly before the end of the Second World War, England ‘bore no resemblance whatsoever to that hazy, glowing nirvana conjured up in the nostalgic chatter to which I had half listened back in Egypt’ (173). In retrospect she understood that the house and gardens of Bulaq Dakhrur represented two, inseparable worlds: ‘the Egypt of foreign administration and an England of assumptions that are now unthinkable’ (8). Throughout the memoir the twinned supports of Lively’s childhood — colonial Egypt and imperial England — are explored through the domestic spaces of her former home. This re-reading of *Oleander, Jacaranda* interprets the intimate, interior spaces of Lively’s childhood as, from the outset, configured within the global narratives of British colonialism.

*Oleander, Jacaranda* not only witnesses the end of British colonial rule, but also reveals how life in England — and more widely Britain – elides and conceals the impact of Empire. Lively’s childhood in Egypt is described as a lonely one, depicting an only child who largely played by herself in a garden ‘that was my universe’ (45). Yet I suggest that the private, often confined world of *Oleander Jacaranda* offers glimpses of life on an island of whiteness, creating a first-hand account of an English household which was marooned within its Egyptian surroundings. Not only does this reading challenge previous dismissals of Lively’s work as sheltered, it also draws attention to the subterranean, partially obscured elements of her first memoir. For Lively’s rendition of a wealthy, white colonial childhood subtly gestures towards worlds and realities that are excluded from a surface level view of drawing rooms, verandahs and garden parties. Just as importantly, these formative years in Egypt underwrite Lively’s later experiences on another, significantly larger island. While the memoir's first reviewers were quick to celebrate her ‘English yet exotic childhood’ (Lord np) as imperial nostalgia, Lively’s account of an isolated upbringing has a much broader and continuing relevance than these early estimations realised. Re-examining *Oleander, Jacaranda* at a time when British society remains incapable of fully addressing its colonial past, I propose that it offers a challenging account of how we remember and understand the legacies of Empire in twenty-first century Britain.

**Island Life**

Lively’s homeschooled education in Egypt provided her with an uneasy view from the fringes, rather than the centre, of a world map covered in a ‘global rash of pink’ (18). For her younger self there was a worrying ambiguity about Egypt’s diagonal stripes of pink and white in the world atlas, indicating the country’s status as protectorate rather than colony of the British Empire. *Oleander, Jacaranda* captures the contradictions of this lonely, colonial education: Lively was taught about ‘the finer moments of the [British] rise to pink glory’ through recommended books such as *Our Island Story* (1905) (1994 19). These rolled ‘Boadicea and King Arthur and Sir Walter Raleigh and Kitchener and Queen Victoria’ into one, creating a convoluted history designed ‘to produce [an] essence of Englishness’ (19). But this triumphalist narrative induced quite the opposite effect in its young reader; Lively imbibed the fictionalised histories of past glories ‘with a whisper of unease’ questioning her own position as English in Egypt (19). No wonder. Henrietta Elizabeth Marshall’s bestselling children’s history *Our Island Story* narrates how the British travelled to, rather than violently colonised, foreign lands because ‘the little green island set in the lonely sea was no longer large enough to contain’ the ambitious Britons (2007 5). It neatly sidesteps the histories of exploitation and dispossession which underpinned Britain’s imperial project, glossing the widespread massacres of Aboriginal people in Australia behind a description of an island ‘inhabited only by scattered groups of natives’ who conveniently disappear after the arrival of early European settlers (2007 446). Looking back in alarm, Lively explains that the set texts of her colonial education meant ‘there was much unlearning to do’ in later life (1994 19).

At the memoir’s beginning Lively describes her grand childhood home, as a ‘whole, infinitely familiar outline that has featured in my dreams for forty years’ (6). The house is both the focal point for her early memories and an ‘expression of a world which was utterly extinguished’ (8). Her early years took place within this confined space, cut off from the surrounding landscape. Lively explains that she and her nanny, Lucy, would travel ‘in to Cairo only once a week’ meaning that the house and gardens formed the entirety of her world (45). In keeping with this isolation, *Oleander, Jacaranda* rarely strays beyond the boundaries of this tiny kingdom and instead tracks, in minute detail, Lively’s life inside the compound. The nearby city of Cairo which boasted attractions such as the whites-only Gezira sporting club and the famed French cafe Groppis (still in business today) were distant landmarks in comparison to the house and its well-kept grounds.

The family’s compound is remembered by Lively as a ‘European enclave of three substantial, garden-encircled houses sat in the landscape like some incongruous island’ (12). Although the extensive, English-styled gardens were ‘largely my mother’s creation’ (37) the water features and rose beds were realised through the labour of three, full-time servants (42). Settled within surrounding fields and canals — known as ‘the cultivation’ — the house and gardens appear as an isolated, even embattled domestic space. The verdant, green lawns encircling Bulaq Dakhrur acted as a frontier for Lively’s English household. These gardens create a physical and symbolic barrier, separating inside from outside and attempting to distinguish between familiar and strange territories. Yet the interior of the house was an equally boundaried world; the rooms and verandahs, filled with furniture and objects imported from Britain, create an island of whiteness, a marooned vision of colonial life which had to be continuously maintained amidst the Egyptian landscape.

Our view upon this island is generated by a virtual journey through the property. It begins inside the young Lively’s bed, examining the ceiling through a filmy white tent (a mosquito net) within the night nursery (30). From here she strays across the upstairs floor, through a pantry solely for her and her nanny’s use, into her parents’ suite of ‘bedroom, dressing-room and bathroom at the far end of the corridor into which I seldom penetrated’ (31). Next she maps out the ground floor of the house, furnished with grand, bulky objects shipped over from England (most of which Lively was forbidden to touch) including a ‘Knole settee from which I was banned’ and an imposing nineteenth-century tallboy, which housed important documents and family photograph albums (32). Passing through the hallway, drawing-room and dining-room, all furnished in an English style, Lively notes that the kitchen beyond was ‘of intense interest to me because [it was] largely out of bounds’ (34). Her descriptive floor-plan of the house, and its accompanying host of servants, are staged within the narrative as excursions from the safety of her bedroom and the shelter of the mosquito net. She trespasses briefly into her memories of the rooms which, in reality, she was forbidden to enter. The house becomes the original architectural blueprint to which Lively continuously returns. Immediately striking within this recounted journey is how little space was actually afforded to the single child as the lavishly decorated rooms — with the exception of the nurseries — remained, for the most part, mysteriously impenetrable to Lively.

This forensic reconstruction of the property uncovers the carefully stratified spaces of white colonial domesticity, with Lively described as being at home only in the few rooms devoted to her and Lucy’s sole use. If Sara Ahmed outlines how whiteness might be understood as that ‘which orientates bodies in specific directions, affecting how they “take up” space’, then this journey through the family home makes visible the orientations of colonial whiteness (2007 150). As the singular European child living in the property, Lively’s domestic freedoms are sacrificed to the maintenance of the Knole settee and the English tallboy. She was forbidden ‘to open [the tallboy’s] drawers’ and banned from the settee ‘because I might bounce on it or dirty the cover’ (32). These solid pieces of Victorian furniture, shipped to Egypt across the Mediterranean Sea, are arranged and maintained to conceal their Egyptian setting. They reorient the house as an English habitation, with Lively recounting how the only ‘Middle Eastern touches I remember were the khelim and Turkish rugs on the floors and the Crusader sword that hung over the mantlepiece’ (32). The set pieces of heavy, antique furnishings arrange the spaces of Bulaq Dakhrur for exclusive European use. They supply an impression of immutability, of permanence, illustrating Catherine Hall and Sonya Rose’s claim that ‘empire [was] lived across everyday practices’, manifesting even in the arrangements of a household (2006 3). But in *Oleander, Jacaranda* this scene of white domesticity is less secure than it might first appear; the tallboy ‘eventually gets its come-uppance’, later relegated in Lively’s London home as a container for ‘detritus like surplus Christmas wrapping paper and discarded spectacles’ (32). Even when remembering these grand furnishings in situ, Lively is a trespasser who momentarily threatens the established order of the household, slipping into banned rooms and riffling through drawers. If the layout of the house seeks to establish a colonial order, Lively highlights its frailties, refusing to be confined upstairs reading the myths of *Our Island Story* and instead probing at the boundaries of this highly stratified space.

This initial journey through Bulaq Dakhrur’s interiors is incomplete, guiding the reader only through the floors above ground. A further, submerged layer to the property appears when Lively later directs us down into the basement. There is a perennial childhood fear running throughout *Oleander, Jacaranda* of a subterranean threat rising to the surface. Lively’s horror of ‘swimming in deep water’ is attributed to the possibility of ‘some sinister mass [that] might come wheeling up from far below’ (118). Canoeing on the Nile shortly before her departure from Egypt, she is terrified by the fast-flowing water, distracted by idea of ‘crocodiles whipping up from below, jaws at the ready’ (156). This youthful fear is so common as to be almost unremarkable. How many successive generations have been transfixed by the ominous, alternating notes which herald the arrival of the great white shark in *Jaws* (1975),paralysed by the same fear of an unseen threat emerging from the depths. But Lively expands this commonplace concern to an emphasis on the hidden, or more accurately *submerged,* layers of the past which lurk below the narrative of *Oleander, Jacaranda*. She notes that although the majority of her memories are normally concealed from view ‘there floats up from time to time some perfect fragment – a shining morsel of experience whose brilliance makes all the more tantalising that unavailable mass’ (16). Once we journey to the basement of Bulaq Dakhrur then, the unsteady foundations of Lively’s marooned, island life come sharply into focus.

The cellar bellow the house was ‘a dry, musty place’, visited with caution as Lively suspected it to be ‘the haunt of snakes and scorpions’ (66). The floor ‘was sandy, as though the desert had thrust up here, a few feet below the surface of the garden’ (66). As a child she made frequent trips into the Egyptian desert, undeterred by the threat of sand-vipers and drawn to this ‘singular, apparently endless’ landscape (65). The desert was an enticing space which reached, unchecked, across the national borders of her children’s atlas, connecting Tunisia with Palestine in a shaded area of brown (66). It later became ‘something voracious, and unreliable’ during wartime Egypt, a vast expanse of ‘immensities in which the war roared and into which vanished those I knew’ (66). Many of the young soldiers who stayed in her parents’ house did not return alive from the desert. They left ‘a little stack of kit-bags’ on the sandy floor of the basement (67). The shifting sands beneath the floorboards of her house emerge as an ominous presence within the memoir. The basement becomes frightening not only as a submerged site beneath the property, a place similar to the unknown depths of the Nile, but because it is a porous zone. If the desert could stretch across national borders in her atlas, it is perceived within *Oleander, Jacaranda* as a deadly, shifting mass. It had, afterall, quickly dispatched with the healthy young soldiers who had enjoyed her parents’ hospitality. In a colonial household filled with symbolic boundary lines, which children and Egyptian servants are not permitted to cross, the stubborn appearance of sand in the property’s subterranean levels betrays the impermanence of the colonial order upstairs, moving unseen beneath the polished floorboards of the drawing room.

Although the tallboys and rich furnishings of the house may suggest a stable world of wealth and privilege, the basement beneath them reveals the precarious foundations on which this ‘little England’ is built. The property’s extensive gardens were besieged on all sides by Egyptian farmland and Lively’s horror of the sandy cellar is charged with the discovery that the desert had ‘thrust up’ below the house too (66). As the initially incomplete blueprint of Bulaq Dakhrur might imply, *Oleander, Jacaranda* presents a surface-level view of white colonial life – of steadfast Victorian furniture and endless garden parties – while indicating that beneath these lie unseen, subterranean narratives. If Ahmed stipulates that white domesticity ‘puts things in their place’, manifesting in ‘the placement of things’, then Lively’s memoir disturbs the apparent security of Bulaq Dakhrur as a white habitation (2007 155). Like a filling hourglass, the basement beneath the house reminds us that the family’s tenure of this property, and by extension white colonial rule, is time-limited. By the 1940s the desert, previously a backdrop for picnics and parties ‘had become vicious, sown with hazards by way of unexploded bombs and ammunition dumps’ (66). It is standing ‘on that thin sand’ beneath the house that Lively remembers ‘leaving Bulaq Dakhrur’ for the last time (66). Unlike the triumphal jingoistic histories favoured by *Our Island Story*, *Oleander Jacaranda* focusses on the undercurrents that whirl beneath the private island of the house and gardens. But *Oleander, Jacaranda* offers us a visual, as well as a written, narrative; Lively’s view onto the end of Empire is further developed by what she terms her ‘double exposure’, a photographic metaphor indicating the multiple, overlapping realities which make up her colonial past. By next turning to the photographs which accompany *Oleander, Jacaranda*, we can uncover further, obscured narratives which lie beneath the written text.

**“The view of things has a double exposure”**

When describing the confluence of events which led to her final departure from Egypt, Lively had no indication that this was the end of her colonial childhood and of the white enclave she inhabited. Describing the hubris of the early 1940s she notes that the general feeling in colonial Cairo was that ‘the global British presence’ (59) was set to continue indefinitely. Subsequently Lively articulates the feeling that her ‘view of things’ within this period, ‘has a double exposure’ (52), assembling multiple overlapping perspectives on Empire in which its end is both unthinkable and unavoidable. Yet Lively’s dual optic is manifest in both the textual narrative *and* within twenty-three black-and-white photographs reproduced within the memoir. These depict her family at home in Bulaq Dakhrur, on the streets of Cairo and Alexandria, and picnicking in the Egyptian desert. Lively has a particular fascination with the revelatory power of photography; her thirteenth novel *The Photograph* (2003) centres upon a single image which irrevocably alters each character’s life, its discovery casting a stone ‘into the reliable, immutable pond of the past’ (2003 61). *Oleander, Jacaranda*’sphotographs can also disturb the accepted truths of the written text. In order to understand Lively’s double view of colonial life we should peer a little closer at the people and scenes depicted in these images. The photographs fulfil various functions, at times illustrating the memoir’s written account, while during others supplementing the gaps in Lively’s memory. Jay Prosser argues that, within modern autobiographies, ‘photographs are increasingly used as shutes into something missing, pointers to a loss that can’t be recovered in the text’ (2005 9). Following Prosser, I suggest that these images provide a counter-narrative to *Oleander, Jacaranda*’s written account, providing stories which are hidden, concealed or repressed in the main text.

These sunny images of colonial life often capture scenes described within Lively’s memoir. They are accompanied by possessions and details which sustain a cultural landscape of Englishness; the young Lively eats alongside a jar of marmite, clutches a Thermos flash in the desert and sports gingham-printed summer dresses in Cairo. Yet several photographs in *Oleander, Jacaranda* tell stories that do not feature in the text of the memoir. In one full page photograph Lively appears with a baby donkey, standing in the foreground of the shot. She is dressed in a smart overcoat, wearing white cotton socks, buckled leather shoes and her right hand pets the animal’s long ears. This image, and the bemused interaction between child and animal is reminiscent of British seaside towns, with their ubiquitous donkey rides along the shoreline. However, if we look behind the animal, three Egyptian children are also present within the background of the frame. Their bare feet and draped, slightly shabby, clothes are separated from Lively by the body of the animal. The four children meet, but do not touch. Unlike other photographs, in which Lively wears light, cotton dresses, this scene appears to be in winter; Lively’s overcoat and the children’s heavy, tightly wrapped scarves, imply an unseasonal chill. Dead twigs and sharp stones litter the path around them. Only one child (Lively) is adequately clothed against the elements, the other three appear vulnerable, with their bare toes against the muddy ground. The donkey is both the focal point and a disturbingly clear barrier within the photograph.

The startling separation between these two worlds is acknowledged in the photograph’s caption, which reads ‘PL with *fellaheen* children near Bulaq Dakhrur. A deeply disquieting photo in its brutal contrasts, with the baby donkey as the cosy feature of interest’ (Photo 7). The adult who writes the caption therefore disrupts ‘the impervious, accepting eye of childhood’ which allowed the younger Lively to dispassionately view scenes of Egyptian poverty and dispossession (10-11). Within the photograph the difference between the children’s footwear is emphasised by their mutual interest in the donkey, as they cluster around the docile animal. The small group is gathered in a semi-circle, they are clearly arranged to face the photographer. The children are both united and separated in a single image which is a carefully organised scene, rather than an uncoordinated social interaction. Crucially, this photograph witnesses an encounter absent from the main text of *Oleander, Jacaranda.* It is, to use Prosser’s phrase, a ‘shute into something missing’, indicating realities omitted from the narrative (9). Although Lively recalls playdates with a handful of (European) friends she notes that ‘I was distinctly short on companionship’ and there are no recalled encounters with Egyptian children within the textual narrative (with the exception of a dirt-eating competition with Ahmed, a young servant) (40)*.* The photograph’s inclusion is far from accidental. By positioning it within images of herself playing amidst the sunshine, roses and fountains of an English-styled garden, Lively indicates towards the lives and experiences that have been excluded both from the family photograph album and her own written account.

I contend that this photograph, nestled amongst family snaps, irrevocably alters the meaning of every subsequent and preceding image within *Oleander, Jacaranda.* Without it the black and white images of Lively’s family enjoying leisure time upon the beach, or eating sandwiches in the desert are marooned in a decontextualised domestic world. The isolation of Lively’s childhood, in which ‘for the most part I was significantly alone’ potentially risks obscuring the realities and consequences of British colonial rule (41). There are brief traces in the background of other photographs; in one depicting a European WREN and her companion enjoying leave in wartime Cairo we can see, to the sharply-dressed WREN’s right, a small shoeless child following in her wake. In the crowd behind her there are several barefooted children, their eyes clearly focussed on the smart couple. There is also a disturbing image of white society enjoying an afternoon at the Gezira Sporting Club, as busy tables of customers are waited upon by ‘attendant *suffragis’* (photo 17). But these do not feature Lively herself, nor do they take place within the domestic confines of her childhood world. In the full-page image of the children and the donkey the shocking results of colonial violence are both laid bare and positioned in close proximity to the author herself. This is a single glimpse of a reality which exists just beyond the various frames of representation in *Oleander, Jacaranda*. The gleaming refection of still water on the left hand side of the photograph implies it may have been taken next to the canal which lay just beyond the boundaries of Bulaq Dakhrur. The image is literally and metaphorically close to home, a scene which lies just out of sight when Lively describes long afternoons playing in the lush gardens. Evoking Ahmed’s conceptualisation of whiteness once more, I maintain that the three figures of the children are not bodies-at-home in Bulaq Dakhrur; they can inhabit neither the interior of the house nor its gardens. They are excluded from a property whose rooms attempt to spatialise a colonial order and whose furnishings expose the orientations of imperial whiteness. These three children must instead hover on both the perimeter of the grand house and of the textual narrative.

Rather than viewing the images within *Oleander, Jacaranda* as a casual selection from Lively’s photograph album, these reproduced pictures are deliberately arranged to create a complex, attendant visual narrative. As the text is arranged through a series of memories, which Lively then analyses in detail, we might read *Oleander, Jacaranda* as akin to a series of snapshots, similar to a photograph album. Within *Family Secrets* (1995) Annette Kuhn notes that ‘in the process of using – producing, selecting, ordering, displaying – photographs [for an album] the family is actually in the process of making itself’ (19). Kuhn’s remarks highlight how the selection of photographs and written memories within *Oleander, Jacaranda* are not incidental. The first album which contained these images was an archive designed to fulfil the particular purposes of the Low family, the original contributors. But in its modified, reproduced form, the photographs within *Oleander, Jacaranda* have been curated once again, now serving the memoirist, with Lively using them to create the narratives and counter-narratives of her colonial childhood. These pairings are always indicative of both presence and absence; although we catch glimpses of a privileged, English life within the confines of a lush garden, the photographs which accompany *Oleander, Jacaranda* simultaneously highlight the obscured narratives of lives beyond the compound walls. *Oleander, Jacaranda*’s written and visual elements are snapshots with a double exposure, charged with the dual meanings of a colonial childhood on the fringes of the British Empire.

**‘Everyone was heading home, except for me’**

Lively belongs within a wider cohort of twentieth-century writers who experienced life in Britain’s colonies, dominions and international settlements before arriving in an unfamiliar country they had been raised to consider ‘home’. Departing Egypt for Britain aboard a packed troopship in 1945, Lively notes that ‘everyone was heading home, except for me, who was going into exile’ (163). Upon her arrival she struggled ‘to come to terms with this stupefying environment: the inconceivable cold, the perpetually leaking sky’ (165) and felt bewildered by England’s strict, but coded, social conventions. Doris Lessing’s memoirs recount her equally dismayed first impressions of London in 1949 as ‘miles of heavy, damp, dead buildings […] inhabited by pale, misshapen sunless creatures’ (8). Like Lively, Lessing’s colonial education in Southern Rhodesia (now Zimbabwe) had led her to anticipate more inspiring scenes. J. G. Ballard's autobiography *Miracles of Life* (2008) records how he too moved from Shanghai’s International Settlement to Britain in 1945, adapting with difficulty to the confusing social norms and inhospitable climate of his new island home. While Ballard realised, after the fall of Singapore, ‘that no amount of patriotic newsreels would put the Union Jack jigsaw together again’ he noted that the British were in denial over the loss of their former Empire (21). I position *Oleander, Jacaranda* within a broader body of life narratives by post-war white British writers, conversing with other memoirs which bear witness to the end of colonial rule and explore their authors’ vexed sense of belonging within Britain.

Yet Lively’s concerns with the aftermath of empire, especially those expressed in *Oleander, Jacaranda,* have become even more relevant in the new millennium. As Whitehall officials refer to the Brexit negotiations as ‘Empire 2.0’ (Coates 2017) numerous academics and commentators have declared that the 2016 EU referendum ‘has its deepest roots embedded firmly in the ashes of the British Empire’ (Dorling and Tomlinson 2019, 42). More specifically, reports from the Runnymede Trust have outlined the need for a more ‘thorough understanding of migration, belonging and empire’ within British school curricula (2019 3). These preliminary studies suggest that Empire cannot be viewed and taught as a late addition to British culture, but understood as an integral part of it. Against this backdrop Lively’s memoirs, which intersect at the moment of her arrival in Britain, offer a timely and personal view onto a shared post-imperial condition. While Britain’s colonial past may have come more sharply into focus in recent years, *Oleander, Jacaranda* reflects how Lively has quietly argued, since the early 1990s, that the decline and dismantlement of Britain’s former Empire is a potent force shaping contemporary British life. In it Lively scrutinises her own complex position on an important hinge of global history; her life writing explores what it means to be born and raised in one colonial world, but to bear witness to another, postcolonial age.

At the end of *Oleander, Jacaranda* Lively explores the bombed ruins surrounding St Paul’s Cathedral, glimpsing new liberating futures for herself ‘amid the wreckage of London and the seething spires of willow herb’ (180). On this site of ruin and regeneration, peering down into a series of newly exposed Roman foundations, she decides to break free from the ‘patriotic rantings of *Our Island Story*’ to seek more pluralistic views of Britain’s intersecting histories (179). We might infer that her own entanglements with Empire will become part of this ongoing story. Yet in 2010, six decades after Lively’s revelation amongst the rubble, then British Prime Minister David Cameron proudly declared that *Our Island Story* had been his most treasured book as a child: ‘it really captured my imagination and […] nurtured my interest in the history of our great nation’ (Hough). During Lively’s childhood in the 1930s, *Our Island Story* was already an anachronistic core text, part of a home-school curriculum that ‘was not exactly up-to-date’ (101). Cameron’s citation of the text as a personal favourite, whether true or not, reveals how the image of Britain as the undiminished centre of a global empire now enjoys a renewed currency within contemporary British politics. *Our Island Story* has been re-mobilised in a new century to support a positive, yet amnesiac, response to Britain’s colonial past. This in turn underpins increasingly strained conceptualisations of a shared British national identity. It demonstrates why Lively’s memories of the end of Empire continue to raise politically and culturally urgent questions, positioning her own life on an island of whiteness within a broader set of island stories. Her years in Bulaq Dakhrur respond to the myths and narratives of British colonialism that continue, seemingly unabated, into the twenty-first century. With characteristic foresight Paul Gilroy describes twenty-first century Britain as being ‘dominated by the inability to even face, never mind actually mourn’ the altered circumstances ‘that followed the end of Empire and consequent loss of imperial prestige’ (98). While Gilroy advises that modern Britain has historically faced away from the end of its Empire, Lively’s account of her own childhood encourages us to take a closer look at its aftermath. If Lively’s reviewers and early critics viewed the domestic concerns of her writing as too sheltered or myopic, returning to *Oleander, Jacaranda* reveals how her interior worlds continue to illuminate and challenge the narratives of post-imperial Britain.

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