

Emma Parker 

Alfred and Emily (2008): Speculation in the Aftermath of Empire

I have lived in over sixty different houses, flats and rented rooms during the last twenty years and not in one of them have I felt at home. [...] The fact is, I don't live anywhere; I never have since I left that first house on the kopje.

— Doris Lessing, *Going Home*

Born in the ruinous aftermath of the First World War, raised in southern Africa during the final years of the British Empire and emerging as a writer immediately after the Second World War, Doris Lessing's memoirs and autobiographies bear witness to life on the hinges of history. Throughout her career Lessing was drawn to the Rhodesian veld of her childhood, writing and rewriting her memories of white settler society. While the autobiographical content of novels such as the *Children of Violence* (1952–69) series, and *The Golden Notebook* (1962) leads some critics to discuss these texts as life writing, Lessing's considerable body of autobiographical non-fiction – from her earliest travel memoir *Going Home* (1957) to the final account of her childhood in *Alfred and Emily* (2008) – also stage frequent returns to her memories of colonial life.¹ These memoirs and autobiographies track a series of contradictions, for although Lessing felt that the Southern Rhodesian landscape was 'her myth country',² she remained fiercely critical of 'the paranoia, the adolescent sentimentality [and] the neurosis' of white settler society.³ The circuitous journeys home to Southern Rhodesia made throughout her autobiographical writings, underscore how Lessing's life writing project is processual; her memoirs and autobiographies return to but are unable to surpass her memories of colonial life. By here returning to Lessing's final rendition of her upbringing in *Alfred and Emily*, I track how her abiding preoccupation with colonialism – her entanglements with the British Empire and its aftermath – registers in the form, as well as the content of her life writing.

Alfred and Emily is an unusual text of two halves. The book's first section (Part I, 'Alfred and Emily: A Novella') rewrites the lives of Lessing's parents – Alfred Tayler and Emily McVeagh – so that they lead separate existences in an alternative twentieth century where the First World War does not take place. It imagines the lives both could have lived, if freed from their fateful encounters with war and empire. Part II, 'Alfred and Emily: Two Lives' is a more conventional memoir recording their married lives, as remembered by Lessing, in Southern Rhodesia. By rewriting history in the book's first half, Lessing swerves away from a biographical reality in which her father was gravely injured shortly before the battle of Passchendaele, met nurse Emily McVeagh while recovering from the amputation of his right leg, before moving his new wife and young children to Persia and later Southern Rhodesia. By writing the First World War out of European history, Lessing reroutes the timeline of events that led to her parents' union and married lives in Africa, consequently writing herself out of existence. Prior to *Alfred and Emily* Lessing had written numerous biographical sketches of her family, describing how Alfred 'had had a country childhood and always wanted to be a farmer'⁴ and Emily's 'fate should have been to run a large [charitable] organisation'.⁵ Yet while Part I ostensibly fulfils these unrealised futures, the novella is not a final, satisfactory ending to Lessing's long biographical project. For the speculative account of her parents' lives is yoked to a memoir – Part II – depicting an embattled, impoverished family struggling to achieve their ambition of profitable enterprise on a colonial frontier.

Alfred and Emily confronts the impossibility of any final conclusion to Lessing's relationship with Southern Rhodesia and the former British Empire. Although the memoir was described by reviewers as 'the righting of lives', it constitutes a practice I term 'speculative life writing', wherein an author rewrites their previous memoirs, autobiographies or autobiographical fiction with an alternative outcome.⁶ Far from being an act of 'righting' which facilitates a final escape, *Alfred and Emily* is yet another *return* to Lessing's Rhodesian childhood. Elsewhere I have described speculative life writing as a sub-genre of contemporary life writing in which 'counterfactual lives [operate] as diversionary routes from actual life narratives'.⁷ These hypothetical lives deviate from the paths established by a writer's earlier work, only to lead the reader back to an author's real memories. Catherine Gallagher's recent study of literary and historical texts that explore 'history's cul-de-sacs and unfinished projects' offers a context for reading speculative life writing as a distinctive component in this broader counterfactual turn.⁸ At its

core, speculative life writing shares a counterfactualist concern with the dual narratives of 'what happened and what might have happened'.⁹ As speculative lives are preceded by earlier acts of self-representation, such diversions are most likely to occur towards the end of an author's career, typically offering a late rewriting of the narrative(s) established in their earlier autobiographical work. Understanding speculative life writing as an expression of lateness evokes Edward Said's argument – which in turn expands Theodor Adorno's conceptualisation of 'spätstil' – that late style refuses to 'be reconciled or resolved' with an artist's earlier creations.¹⁰ Instead late style is disruptive, a contradiction which refuses the harmony of closure.

It is important to note that Lessing was not alone in experimenting with speculative life writing at the beginning of the twenty-first century; Penelope Lively's *Making It Up* (2005) rewrites Lively's previous memoirs by imagining eight alternative outcomes to her life. These episodes focus upon 'those climactic moments when things might have gone entirely differently'.¹¹ Raised at the opposite end of the African continent to Lessing, Lively's upbringing in Egypt features prominently in *Making It Up*, reimagining the lonely, colonial childhood recorded in her earlier memoir *Oleander, Jacaranda* (1994). While Ruth Prawer Jhabvala did not publish autobiographies, she too was concerned with imagining her 'alternative destinies' in later life, publishing *My Nine Lives* (2004) as 'chapters of a possible past'.¹² It is vital that none of these counterfactual experiments fully escape their authors' actual experiences. On the contrary, by exploring the lives that might have been, speculative life writing gestures back towards the lives that were.

Reading *Alfred and Emily* as speculative life writing reveals that the book is not two discrete texts, but a single act of autobiographical self-representation. The novella is inseparable from the memoir that follows. While there are clear generic and thematic distinctions between Parts I and II, both rewrite Lessing's previous accounts of her life, as described in her novels, memoirs and autobiographies, in order to scrutinise her settler upbringing. Lessing described the text as an attempt to give her parents 'lives as might have been',¹³ that functioned as 'an antidote to what I actually lived in – Rhodesia at war, the last throbs of the British Empire'.¹⁴ Writing five decades earlier in her first memoir *Going Home*, she had described white settlerdom as a 'mass disease'.¹⁵ If *Alfred and Emily* is an antidote then its counterfactual novella might, at first glance, appear to remedy Lessing's early, toxic exposure to white supremacy in southern Africa. But instead the text circles back, inexorably, to her family's house on the kopje, returning to the violent memories of war and empire from which Lessing, even in old age, was still 'trying

to get free'.¹⁶ Even by rerouting history, the narrative does not – or more accurately cannot – bypass Lessing's memories of settler life. Contrary to previous interpretations of this hybrid text as a reconciliatory conclusion, I outline how speculative life writing explores and exposes life in the aftermath of empire.

Alfred and Emily: A Novella

Part I takes place in a world which, initially at least, promises 'only peace and plenty' amidst seemingly endless 'summer days when the sun always shone'.¹⁷ In the absence of war twentieth-century Britain is a prosperous, self-satisfied nation while England 'was as full of big houses and high-living people as it had been in Edwardian times'.¹⁸ Although Alfred Tayler and Emily McVeagh meet, their social interactions during idyllic cricket matches or occasional visits to London are fleeting encounters. However, as Alfred and Emily grow older, the novella offers an increasingly disillusioned view of this alternative world. When Emily describes children in London's East End as being 'pitifully ill-fed',¹⁹ so malnourished that 'their poor little ribs [are] sticking out', it is clear that not everyone benefits from this apparent age of peace and prosperity.²⁰ Such images repeatedly reveal that 'the riches of Britain [...] did not seem to percolate downwards'.²¹ As the narrative progresses, scenes of urban poverty interrupt the earlier, sunny images of a golden age, with glimpses of social inequality disrupting Alfred's and Emily's lives. While Lessing describes Part I as an attempt to give Emily her 'good years [in Edwardian London] all over again', the author refuses to allow her parents to inhabit a utopia.²² Behind the fantasy of a prosperous imperial nation are the shadowy figures of hungry children, excluded from both public narratives of unmitigated national success and Emily's private experiences of a glorious peacetime. *Alfred and Emily*, then, is not an exercise in wish-fulfilment.

The boundaries between Parts I and II are permeable, with Lessing's past occasionally breaking through the surface of the novella's narrative. Several scenes are disrupted by recollections of Lessing's mother describing her pre-war life, while her uninterested daughter was 'out in the bush somewhere, dusty bare legs in *veldschoen*'.²³ This is the startling appearance of a child (Lessing) who, in the world of Part I, has been written out of existence. In such moments Lessing deliberately lifts the thin veil of her alternative world to reveal her own, real memories. This sudden appearance of the author emphasises that *Alfred and Emily*'s hazy vision of another Britain is firmly rooted in

the heat and dust of Lessing's Rhodesian childhood. When the counterfactual and the actual collide, this vision of peacetime England becomes a hallucination, a fulfilment of the fantasies Lessing had heard from her mother. Lessing does not conjure an ideal nation, nor does she fully erase her own childhood in the process. David James astutely notes that by breaking through the diegetic frame in such moments, 'Lessing suspends our immersion' in the novella.²⁴ Going a little further, I suggest that these moments of disruption forge greater connections between the remembered Southern Rhodesia in Part II and the counterfactual Britain depicted in Part I. The latter purports to realise Alfred's and Emily's frustrated dreams, but what it actually delivers is the failure of this vision. This rewritten history cannot fulfil its initial promise of prosperity and peace.

The novella's setting reveals the underlying imperial concerns of Lessing's speculative life writing, with war and empire remaining the twinned driving forces that are barely concealed beneath the surface of the narrative. We are informed that, by the 1910s, the nation was

wealthy, was booming, was at a level of prosperity the leader writers and public figures congratulated themselves and everybody on. Britain had not had a war since the Boer War; nor were there wars in Western Europe, which was on a high level of well-being. It was enough only to contrast the dreadful situation of the old Austrian Empire and the Turkish Empire, in collapse, to know that keeping out of war was a recipe for prosperity. Various skirmishes in Africa, which could have grown worse, were damped down, because 'Why spoil what we have?' France, Germany, the Low Countries were booming.²⁵

England remains a class-ridden society where the social conditions of the Edwardian era continue uninterrupted, yet this imaginary nation is still squarely set in the context of counterfactual colonial histories. Rather than being defeated during the First World War, the Austrian and Ottoman Empires struggle onwards to a steady decline. These empires may be geographically distant, but they continue to simmer in the background of Alfred's and Emily's lives. The self-satisfied complacency of the leader writers and public figures reveals, moreover, an international order where both Britain and Western Europe remain in a position of uncontested authority. Meanwhile the reference to dampening 'various skirmishes in Africa' suggests that anti-colonial struggles against European rule across the African continent are, for the time being, being successfully suppressed.

Although Britain has steered clear of global conflicts, the alternative London that Emily inhabits is filled with citizens fulfilling their imperial fantasies by proxy, choosing sides to support in the ongoing conflict between Ottoman and Serbian forces. Women supporting the Ottoman side wear their hair in ostentatious ringlets to demonstrate their political allegiance and brawl with their equally extravagantly attired Serbian-supporting opponents. Meanwhile 'the shingle and the bobs Emily's smart friends wore had begun because of the riots and civil war that marked the end of the Hapsburgs'.²⁶ We might deduce, from such fashionable choices, that although Britain itself has steered clear of conflict, it exists in a geopolitical climate dominated by imperial decline and the contestation of previously established world orders. Furthermore, as the narrative progresses, Britain's self-satisfied image of prosperity is punctured by glimpses of civil unrest at home. Despite altering historical events, European colonialism continues to outline the world of Lessing's novella. She alters, but does not escape, the imperial histories which impacted so resoundingly upon her own life.

The young male counterparts of these coiffured women are described as restless, keen for their nation to re-enter international conflicts. Wearing army fatigues and polished boots, their homemade uniforms articulate a frustrated belief that they are 'surplus to requirements' because they do not have a British war effort to join.²⁷ Emily's nephew, Cedric, reminds his aunt that beneath the frivolities of unnecessary uniforms and ostentatious hair-dos lies a conviction that 'we are the surplus generation; we have to assert ourselves'.²⁸ Britain's prosperous future ironically excludes the nation's youth, who are viewed as an unwanted excess. Unable to bolster the ranks of their own army 'the young men were going off to London and signing up with recruiters for service in the wars that were going on' elsewhere.²⁹ One of these returning soldiers later describes his experiences of the South African Transvaal to Emily. The younger generations described in *Alfred and Emily* are all motivated by colonial ambitions, which they must either fulfil by proxy or by fighting as mercenaries in foreign wars. Through this social context Lessing reconsiders what Britain would be without its imperial ambitions, devoid of its aggressively held position at the centre of a global empire. Cedric's generation assert their imperial sympathies by brawling on the street, or fighting as paid soldiers, because the nation does not require them to maintain its formal colonies and territories abroad. At the heart of the novella is the implication that, even in this other world, Britain cannot conceptualise a future without its Empire.

Although writing speculatively allows Lessing to alter the course of events that led to her Rhodesian childhood (namely, the outbreak of war and her parents' marriage), imperialism continues to simmer below the surface of the narrative. In moments when Lessing's actual recollections disrupt the novella, we are reminded that her memories of settler life are barely repressed in this alternative twentieth century. Reading Part I as underwritten by suppressed colonial histories runs counter to both Elizabeth Maslen's assessment that it 'casts a kindly eye on a possible past'³⁰ and Judith Kegan Gardiner's suggestion that it offers 'the happier fictionalised' version of Lessing's life, better for both 'individuals and the English nation'.³¹ Beneath the veneer of a booming, wealthy Britain Lessing's narrative visualises the nation as perched, uneasily, at a crossroads, unable both to fulfil its younger generations' colonial ambitions and to reform a deeply stratified society.

Alfred and Emily: Two Lives

The majority of scenes from Lessing's colonial childhood within Part II have been previously described in her earlier life writings and readers of those other works will find almost no new information in this short memoir. Yet in this final retelling Lessing undoes the developmental chronology of *Under my Skin* (1994), and rejects the dense social and historical detail of her travel memoirs *Going Home* and *African Laughter* (1993). Part II of *Alfred and Emily* fragments scenes from these earlier life narratives while suggesting that there can be no conclusion or closure from Lessing's memories of Southern Rhodesia/Zimbabwe. Even when her speculative life writing appears to be rewriting history, it marks the limits of self-reinvention. Lessing's colonial childhood is the frame encompassing both parts of *Alfred and Emily*. Just as her late turn to speculation suggests other possible pasts, presents and futures, Lessing returns to the familiar setting of her parents' farmhouse on the Rhodesian veld. If the counterfactual world of Part I leads back to European colonialism in Africa, Part II marks a further return to Lessing's settler childhood in Rhodesia.

In Part II of *Alfred and Emily* Lessing confesses that, despite recording her experiences across numerous autobiographies and memoirs, she still 'cannot make sense of Time in its boundaries'.³² As the second half is structured through brief episodes, the narrative barely progresses, plotting an uneven course through her parents' disappointed lives. The result is a deliberately narrow view of settler domesticity that rarely strays beyond the limits of the family's former farm. Through this faltering, circular narrative, Lessing's speculative life writing rejects the

grand, mythologised narratives of imperialism which envisaged an upward arc of progress.

Instead, Part II explores life amongst the detritus and colonial remains, focusing on the battered objects within her former childhood home. These possessions demonstrate the impossibility of her parents achieving their intended future of prosperous, colonial settlement. From the magnificent Persian rugs that soon 'wore down to their elemental threads' to the 'trunks crammed full of plenty from Liberty's and Harrods', these objects reflect the lives Alfred and Emily had *hoped* to lead in Southern Rhodesia.³³ Lessing explores the consequences of their unrealised dreams through the items of luggage that both her parents brought with them to the farm. Her father's suitcase held 'accoutrements and clothes for cricket: he had scarcely played in Persia but now he was going to a British colony and cricket there must be'.³⁴ Another trunk contained riding gear that was quickly rendered useless as the soil around the property was unsuited to horses. When Alfred discovered that these hobbies were impossible, he focused on pursuing a frugal existence as a farmer, hoping that a successful venture in Southern Rhodesia would later 'fulfil his dream to buy a farm in Essex or Suffolk, and be an English farmer'.³⁵ However, this ambition too was never fulfilled. In an episode which sees her sift through the neglected contents of Alfred's trunk, Lessing describes her father as tempted by a narrative of imperial and personal progress, believing that ex-soldiers who were sent to farm on the edges of empire could later return and become wealthy landowners in Britain. Instead, he became trapped, unable to profitably cultivate his patch of land, and later died in Southern Rhodesia.

The contents of Emily's luggage also reveal a projected future, an anticipated middle-class European existence which necessitated 'the trunk with the dozen or so dark-red leather volumes of music scores [along with] a trunk, "Wanted on Voyage" of evening frocks [...] silvery stockings, brocaded shoes'.³⁶ Lessing's mother was drawn to the rituals of colonial life, hoping that her days would be filled with tea parties and social occasions like those she had hosted in Persia. Her luggage trunks were filled with practical items too; nursing equipment was packed alongside 'crayons and chalks, and books'.³⁷ Whether as an English farmer, or a successful educator and society hostess, Lessing here suggests how her parents were fatally motivated by the image of their idealised, imaginary lives. Her speculative life writing dwells upon the failed promises of empire through a conjunction of the counterfactual and the actual. Like the disaffected nation's youth in Part I, the items of luggage in Part II are little more than surplus.

Alfred and Emily purports to be a resolution, effecting Lessing's desire to give both her parents the lives they had hoped for by rerouting them away from Southern Rhodesia. But ultimately it neither provides nor sustains these consolatory visions. Instead, Lessing's speculative memoir concludes with a scene describing the stultifying atmosphere of Rhodesian white society, of 'those long afternoons that went on ... and on ... and on'.³⁸ The tedium of this world was enough to prompt a young Lessing to plot her escape. While she acknowledges that 'those years before we all left Rhodesia' were a turning point in history – marked by both the Second World War and the collapse of British colonial rule – *Alfred and Emily*'s second narrative does not record a time beyond or after empire.³⁹ Instead it depicts Lessing in the act of chasing after empire, examining the fragments and leftovers of her settler childhood, poring over the contents of her parents' luggage, returning to the remains of the family farm. Lessing may initially appear to rewrite these pivotal memories through a counterfactual world, but the structure of her speculative life writing instead mimics the claustrophobic confines of colonial life.

Alfred and Emily has been typically read as a satisfying ending to the 'process of filial reconciliation'⁴⁰ in which Lessing 'imagine[s] and fashion[s] more satisfying lives for her parents'.⁴¹ Yet Lessing's final, experimental memoir refuses a satisfactory ending to a complicated relationship with both her parents and her memories of white settlerdom. The permeable boundaries between novella and memoir reflect the need to read both, side-by-side, as speculative life writing. While Alfred Tayler and Emily McVeagh are initially exempted from their experiences in Southern Rhodesia, their separate lives take place against a backdrop of colonial power and decline. The imperial world of the novella bleeds directly into Lessing's actual memories in Part II, with neither able to launch a successful escape from her early life. As the final chapters of *Alfred and Emily* depict her parents' various schemes for 'getting-off-the-farm', these rehearsals demonstrate the impossibility of an actual departure.⁴²

To read *Alfred and Emily* as speculative life writing is to insist that the text holds a crucial, albeit complicated, position within the wider constellation of Lessing's memoirs and autobiographies. We should, as David James stipulates, be suspicious of claims made in the book's preface that it offers a form of consolation.⁴³ For rather than concluding Lessing's life writing project, the text launches an experimental series of returns that demonstrate the impossibility of escape. In his discussions of late style, Said remarks that its proponents reject the serenity of closure in favour of 'a return or homecoming to realms forgotten or left behind by the

relentless advancement of history'.⁴⁴ Said's remarks underscore the disruptive, generative possibilities of late style, yet his commentary might also excavate the possibilities and concerns of speculative life writing. At the time of *Alfred and Emily's* publication, Lessing's recollections of her Rhodesian childhood – and the coterminous collapse of British colonial rule across the globe – belonged to an increasingly remote century, part of a comfortably distant past. Through a late turn to speculation, Lessing brings her memories of colonial rule to bear on the twenty-first-century present. By opposing what Said terms the relentless advancement of history, Lessing inscribes her Rhodesian childhood at the end of empire onto a new century. As her characteristically forthright refusal of an OBE in 1992 implied, Lessing never failed to comprehend how Britain's relationship with its former colonies continued to shape the post-imperial nation.⁴⁵ She understood that the influence of many European empires resonated long after official decolonisation. In an age of resurgent imperial amnesia, when a third of British people believe that the nation's former colonies were 'better off overall' for being colonised, Lessing's critical insights into the afterlives of colonialism remain both crucial and timely.⁴⁶ As a final, speculative life narrative, *Alfred and Emily* is therefore not an ending but a beginning, one which sends us spiraling back into the network of Lessing's life writing and prompts us to reconsider how the aftermath of empire marks and contours our postcolonial present.

Notes

- 1 Susan Watkins rightly notes that whether Lessing's work is 'classified as novel, essay, memoir or official autobiography', she was consistently preoccupied 'with the blurred dividing lines between fact, truth and fiction'. Susan Watkins, *Doris Lessing* (Manchester: Manchester University Press), 29.
- 2 Doris Lessing, *African Laughter: Four Visits to Zimbabwe* (London: Flamingo, 1993), 35.
- 3 Doris Lessing, *Going Home* (London: Panther, 1968), 299.
- 4 Doris Lessing, 'Impertinent Daughters', *Granta*, 14 (1984), 51–68; <https://granta.com/impertinent-daughters/>
- 5 Doris Lessing, 'My Mother's Life (Part Two)', *Granta*, 17 (1985), 227–38; <https://granta.com/autobiography-part-two-my-mothers-life/>
- 6 Blake Morrison, 'The Righting of Lives', *The Guardian*, 17 May 2008; <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2008/may/17/fiction.dorislessing>
- 7 Emma Parker, 'Penelope Lively's Speculative Life Writing: A Discussion of *Making It Up* and *Ammonites and Leaping Fish*', *Moving Worlds: A Journal of Transcultural Writings*, 18:1 (2018), 63–78 (p. 64).
- 8 Catherine Gallagher, *Telling It Like It Wasn't: The Counterfactual Imagination in History and Fiction* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2018), 47.
- 9 *Ibid.*, 9.

- 10 Edward Said, *On Late Style: Music and Culture Against the Grain* (London: Bloomsbury, 2017), 7.
- 11 Penelope Lively, *Making It Up* (London: Viking, 2005), 1.
- 12 Ruth Praver Jhabvala, *My Nine Lives* (London: John Murray, 2004), p. vii.
- 13 Doris Lessing, *Alfred and Emily* (London: Fourth Estate, 2008), p. vii.
- 14 Ibid., 186.
- 15 *Going Home*, 17.
- 16 *Alfred and Emily*, p. viii.
- 17 Ibid., 3.
- 18 Ibid., 84.
- 19 Ibid., 84.
- 20 Ibid., 93.
- 21 Ibid., 84.
- 22 Ibid., 24.
- 23 Ibid., 28.
- 24 David James, *Discrepant Solace: Contemporary Literature and the Work of Consolation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), 157.
- 25 *Alfred and Emily*, 84.
- 26 Ibid., 81.
- 27 Ibid., 92.
- 28 Ibid.
- 29 Ibid., 108.
- 30 Elizabeth Maslen, *Doris Lessing*, 2nd edn (Tavistock: Northcote House Publishers, 2014), 101.
- 31 Judith Kegan Gardiner, 'Afterword: Encompassing Lessing', in *Doris Lessing: Border Crossings*, ed. Alice Ridout and Susan Watkins (London: Continuum, 2009), 161.
- 32 *Alfred and Emily*, 159.
- 33 Ibid., 220.
- 34 Ibid., 164.
- 35 Ibid., 174.
- 36 Ibid., 164.
- 37 Ibid.
- 38 Ibid., 270.
- 39 Ibid., 272.
- 40 Roberta Rubenstein, *Literary Half-Lives: Doris Lessing, Clancy Sigal and Roman a Clef* (London: Palgrave, 2014), 193.
- 41 Rubenstein, *Literary Half-Lives*, 199.
- 42 *Alfred and Emily*, 255.
- 43 James, *Discrepant Solace*, 152.
- 44 *On Late Style*, 135.
- 45 See <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/politics/3234801/Doris-Lessings-rejection-letter.html>.
- 46 See <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/mar/11/uk-more-nostalgic-for-empire-than-other-ex-colonial-powers>.