

‘Ruins in the Jungle: Nature and Narrative’

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When W. Somerset Maugham, ‘in a far island away down in the South East of the Malay Archipelago’, encountered a great cockatoo which stared at him, his first instinct was to look about for the cage from which it must have escaped.¹ In the jungle, he says, he never quite got over his surprise at seeing at liberty birds and beasts whose natural habitation seemed to him a Zoological Garden. Maugham’s little joke is a rather late instance of a trope that had been a nineteenth-century commonplace, a differentiation between Europe and the Orient that expressed itself in the opposition of civilization and nature, the domesticated and the wild. As the cultural artefacts of Asia were being amassed by western museums, its natural objects might be encountered in Kew Gardens or the London Zoo, and to the urban sophisticate Maugham was pretending to be, this was where they ‘naturally’ belonged.

The West has no jungle: that is to say, it is a word (itself of Hindi origin) that cannot apply to anywhere in Europe or North America. To Western observers of Asia, the jungle is the Other habitat *par excellence*, the location and symbol of everything most foreign about the foreign parts penetrated by the European empires and later their vast shambling international rearguard of tourists. With its fascinations and dangers and its extreme difference from home, the jungle was as much a challenge to colonial and travel writers as it had been to the explorers clearing a trail through it. This essay considers some ways in which that challenge has been met. The issue here is representations of the jungle, and these constitute a discourse and a tradition which embrace fictional and non-fictional writing. I will be moving back and forth, in what follows, across the boundary between representations of actual and of imaginary experience, a boundary which is notoriously permeable in travel writing of all kinds, and at times as indistinct as any other artificial boundary in a jungle.

To read about the jungle is often to be struck by a recurrent figure of ingestion, an anxiety about being swallowed up by the scene of nature, never to reappear. In writing about the tropical East, the uncharted and unaccountable vastness and darkness of the jungle is often metonymic of the troubling enormity of the Orient itself, into which the unwary intruder may vanish and be lost. The jungle may be a refuge, for the savage or the outlaw or the holidaymaker, but it can also engulf people who cross its threshold. When two adventurers enter the jungle in one of Hugh Clifford's stories, '[t]heir little expedition slipped into the forest, and the wilderness swallowed it' – they enter in the form of an abstract nominative ('expedition') which is an agential subject, but are immediately transformed, in the syntax of the sentence, into objects of the place's incorporation.² To those unfamiliar with it, the jungle has as few landmarks as the open sea, and an equally insatiable appetite. Those who broached the jungle might find themselves swallowed historically as well as geographically. Colonial administrators like Clifford – trained to observe, knowledgeable, highly literate, and usually sharing a common background with the literary elite at home – are a particularly valuable source of writing about outlandish places. When Leonard Woolf came as a young colonial officer to Hambantota district in Ceylon in August 1908, he too at first felt as engulfed as Clifford's adventurers had been, as if he had disappeared into some dark ahistorical otherworld, so that he could not establish where he was by triangulation with the familiar landmarks of his own past. 'I have no connection with yesterday,' he writes to Lytton Strachey in October; 'I do not recognize it nor myself in it.'³ He felt he had lost his place in the story.

The jungle was, to be sure, the place of nature, and a contrast between nature and modernity was one of the staples of a Western art and literature whose agenda was set by Romanticism. The contrast between the jungles of Africa and Asia and South America, and the cities of an industrial society which the travellers who visited them had left behind, became increasingly marked with the increasing transformation of both city and country in the West. But at issue here is not just the difference between the modern and an earlier phase of historical development. The point was that as the West changed, the jungle seemed changeless. Modern people in an evolutionary process had exchanged

nature for history – or, in a slightly different teleology, they had fulfilled or transcended nature in becoming historical beings. The forest was not just the absence of civilization. As Julius Caesar had understood two millennia before when he crossed with his army from the West to the East bank of the Rhine, it was the opposite of civilization.⁴

The Rhine is the crucial east-west dividing line in the geography of *The Gallic War*. The Gaulish tribes to the West, however rebellious, were tractable material for the Roman imperium, and they had a way of life, customs, and religions, that could be mapped to a Roman idea of culture. But the East bank of the Rhine was the threshold of the incorrigibly savage, where, Caesar had been informed, wild and unwholesome people lived in the trackless darkness under the trees. In the German forests to the East, as Caesar describes them, distinctions blurred, distances were incalculable, there was no law, and the people were in every sense close to beasts. Caesar had more sense than to march his troops far into this forbidding region, whose inhabitants appeared to live in the place of nature as Thomas Hobbes was to imagine it, cruel and ignoble and unredeemed. They seemed prehistoric, for the jungle also has no history, and indeed in both its changelessness and its unfathomability, it is the enemy of history. ‘The more you are in jungle, particularly if you are alone, the more one tends to feel it personified, something or someone hostile, dangerous,’ Leonard Woolf was to remember. ‘I twice lost myself in jungle, a terrifying experience, and each time it was due to carelessness, to forgetting for an instant to be on one’s guard against the treachery of the jungle.’⁵

The disorientation of the familiar lost-in-the-jungle anecdote brings a kind of relapse, for not only is the destination – the teleological direction of the journey – lost, but the traveller is condemned to a futile and endless circulation, a story that is a travesty of narrative because it has no shape, no beginning or end. Getting lost in the jungle is already the end of the story. In Maugham’s ‘Neil MacAdam’, Angus Munro describes how he lost his way in thick jungle, realizing (this is another familiar motif of the jungle narrative) that he has been walking in circles; after a few hours of frantic wandering, he says, he would have blown his brains out if only he had had a revolver. But he survives, of course, to tell the tale. Later in the story, Munro’s wife Darya is abandoned in the

jungle and never seen again, and we can only imagine what happened, how long she will survive and how she will die. She simply disappears off the map of the narrative; she has lapsed from history into nature, rejoining the life of the beasts.⁶

There is a similar moment at the end of Leonard Woolf's novel *The Village in the Jungle* (1913). As colonial district officer in Hambantota, responsible for the inhabitants' welfare, Woolf had seen how thin was the line separating the region's Sinhala peasants from ruin and starvation. In his novel about their lives, various tragedies overtake the family of Silindu and the village where they live. The village is depopulated and forgotten and disappears into the jungle from which it had sprung, and the last survivor, Punchi Menika, who has been living on roots and leaves, lies dying of fever and starvation, alone in the tumbledown remains of her hut. 'When the end was close upon her a great black shadow glided into the doorway.'⁷ Whether it is a wild boar, a hallucination, or a devil, she recognizes that the jungle has come for her, and in this moment the narrative ends as the jungle folds over it: there can be no more story. What will happen next is unspeakable, and invisible, for there can be no human being to witness and recount it, there is only the darkness and silence of an engulfing alterity.

If the jungle was the state of nature in this Hobbesian sense, malignant and hostile and constantly at war with human efforts to subdue, cultivate, civilize, and narrate it, then there can be no more potent image of this struggle than ruins in the jungle. In Kipling's *The Jungle Book*, the monkey people, the Bandar-log, kidnap Mowgli and try to recruit him to their travesty of human civilization in the ruins of an abandoned city.⁸ This is a complicated case, because Kipling's jungle is overdetermined, being at once an unforgiving natural environment, a model of a rule-governed society, and the idyllic playground of a privileged child. In the story 'Kaa's Hunting', the important contrast is between the glamorous but anarchic society of the monkey city, and the sober but law-abiding polity of the jungle, guaranteed by Mowgli's tutors the panther and the bear. We are not told who built the city or why they abandoned it: perhaps it simply succumbed to the greater power of the forces of nature. In any case, it offers no temptation to any of the jungle creatures except the monkey tribe, and their encampment in its ruins is proof that,

in Kipling's eyes, they are not worthy citizens of the jungle. Yet nor do they properly belong in a built environment. Clever but lazy, the monkeys have constructed a mimic and inauthentic civility, and the ruined state of their city testifies to their damning lack of creativity.

In 'The King's Ankus' in *The Second Jungle Book*, Mowgli returns to the ruins, for an adventure involving an ancient cobra who still guards the king's treasure in a secret vault beneath the overgrown ruins. Mowgli steals a jewelled elephant goad (the pointed stick with which the mahout controls the elephant), with tragic results, and then returns it, having learned his lesson that the emblems of human history (and property) do not belong in the pastoral scene of his jungle life, because they are at odds with its idyllic changelessness: 'I will never again bring into the Jungle strange things,' he resolves.⁹ This little episode of 'imperial Gothic' reminds us of an important fact: ruins in the jungle are uncanny and usually haunted.¹⁰ An odour of Gothic seems to cling to them, bringing with it an idiom which the most sober of writers may be unable to resist. When Hugh Clifford, on colonial business, travelled to the decayed city of Brunei, for example, 'today we behold,' he reported, 'not Brunei, the land of ancient story, but its shriveled mummy and the gray ashes of its empire'.¹¹ Meanwhile the curse of the elephant goad teaches Mowgli that the natural world embraces history at its peril and is better off without it, a lesson that will be more cruelly driven home when he himself is expelled from the jungle upon becoming an adult human. Actual jungles have generally had less success in protecting themselves from human encroachment.

Like their African equivalent in popular tales about cursed and mummy-infested Egyptian tombs such as Bram Stoker's *The Jewel of Seven Stars* (1903), or the burial vault of kings in Rider Haggard's *King Solomon's Mines* (1886) or the palace of Ayesha in his *She* (1887), ruins in the Oriental jungle are generally represented as uncanny, whether they are the relic of an indigenous civilization or an earlier foreign invader. In Hugh Clifford's story 'The Skulls in the Forest', Martin Halliday thinks he has found a specifically ahistorical spot, a place of unfallen nature – 'The place where he was standing had never suffered profanation: it had no past, no history; it was straight from

the hand of its Maker'¹² – only to discover under the brushwood the earthworks of an ancient fort of European design. His attempt to colonize the place with settlers ends in disaster and many deaths, for what seemed like a jungle idyll is in fact haunted by a terrible history. The unappeased spirits of the earlier settlement (apparently Portuguese of the fifteenth century) exact a wholesale vengeance on the new arrivals, and the place is left at the end of the tale, as it was at the beginning, uninhabited by a living soul. Purged of human activity, it reverts to empty hinterland, and to its natural function of simply being there.

Ruins, especially if they are overrun by an encroaching nature, encourage thoughts about the mortality of civilizations, as the Roman Forum inspired Gibbon's *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, and the accounts of Egyptologists lie behind Shelley's 'Ozymandias'. Asia, like Latin America, has several sites where the jungle has laid waste the works of a great civilization, and none more spectacular than the Khmer temples and palaces at Angkor. Hugh Clifford speculated about its mysterious history. André Malraux, notoriously, stole from it. Pierre Loti had plundered it only for literary copy, purporting to find in it 'un lugubre accueil', a dismal welcome.¹³ The resourceful Loti managed to write a whole book about Angkor, though he had spent less than two days at the site, in November 1901 – his narrative adds a third full day to the visit, which in fact he spent travelling back towards Phnom Penh. Loti's ruins in the jungle become the occasion for flights of the egotistical sublime. 'Le voilà donc ce sanctuaire qui hantait jadis mon imagination d'enfant et où je ne suis monté qu'après tant de courses par le monde, quand c'est déjà le soir de ma vie errante!'¹⁴ Somerset Maugham stayed longer at Angkor, and wanted never to leave it. He said he had never seen 'anything in the world more beautiful' than Angkor's temples; the desolation was a strong part of the beauty, and the overgrown city presented itself irresistibly as a *paysage moralisé*. 'For centuries nature has waged its battle with the handiwork of man; it has covered, disfigured and transformed it, and now all these buildings that a multitude of slaves built with so much labour lie a confused tangle among the trees.'¹⁵

For Hugh Clifford, descriptive ‘travel writing’ about Angkor was not enough; he was moved to give the ruins a story. His *The Downfall of the Gods* (1911) is a scholarly historical novel – though the title is Wagnerian, the model may well be Flaubert’s *Salammbô* – which imagines how the great mediaeval Hindu empire at Angkor came to grief, through revolution, anarchy and invasion.¹⁶ Clifford’s fascination with the lost story of Angkor must have been similar to that of his fictional Halliday pondering the ruined fort in ‘The Skulls in the Forest’: ‘It has got a queer grip upon me, this place: it seizes my imagination – I can’t win free of it. How often I stand looking at those huge, silent trees, and long for them to have voices wherewith to speak, that they might tell me of the sights which they have seen – the tragedy of that abandoned fort, of this deserted fairyland’.¹⁷ The ruins seem to contain a story, but are unable themselves to tell it.

For Clifford as for Halliday, the ruins in the jungle become an obsession because they are the signs of a history that has been struck dumb. There is no written record of the collapse of Angkor, and it becomes the function of the traveller to give the place the gift of history, and supply it with the story that has evaporated from its ruins. Clifford had already speculated on the question in his non-fictional writing, in *Further India* (1905), where he suggested that earthquakes may have caused the inhabitants to abandon Angkor. His local knowledge was the warrant for this speculation, with its demystifying tone. ‘As regards the encroachment of the forest, that, I think, need occasion no surprise. I have myself seen a ploughed field in tropical Asia covered in the space of fifteen months with dense undergrowth twelve feet in height, through which a man could pass only with the greatest difficulty, with the aid of a stout wood-knife.’¹⁸

Several years later he returned to the theme of Angkor’s tragedy in *The Downfall of the Gods*, as if the wreck of Angkor demanded not only a geographical but also an imaginative interpretation. Clifford’s novel is an aetiological myth, a work of not archaeological but narrative restoration of the ruins. (There is a kind of analogy with the speculative and controversial restoration by Arthur Evans of the Minoan palace at Knossos, over several decades beginning in 1900.)¹⁹ At the end of *The Downfall of the Gods*, Thai invaders overrun and sack the city, the people of Angkor revert to being a

‘race of jungle-dwellers,’ and the principal surviving characters are reduced to living in a forest hut. ‘Already the trees of the forest begin to invade the sanctuaries, and the wild fig vines thrust their tendrils between stone and stone.’²⁰ The jungle puts an end to history and story, reasserting the apparently changeless rhythms of nature. But as the jungle turned civilization into ruins, Clifford the belated traveller can turn the ruins back into narrative, resurrecting a buried history from them, but resurrecting it only as a story of loss, and a *memento mori*. He meets the challenge of otherness by what might be called an appropriation, but in a narrative which proves to be only too appropriate to his own history.

With the return of the jungle, *The Downfall of the Gods* ends in the same way as *The Village in the Jungle*, or indeed as Kipling’s ‘The Judgement of Dungara’, in which the jungle swallows up the mission house as soon as the missionaries depart in failure. Kipling, Clifford, Woolf and Maugham all seem to have taken a melancholy satisfaction in the spectacle of the defeat of the handiwork of man by the irresistible might of nature. The jungle in this aspect may be said to be an important manifestation of the Oriental sublime. Like other instantiations of the sublime, it creates an awareness of the potential annihilation of the self. It is one of those sublime natural phenomena which, according to Kant, challenge the subject’s attempts to appropriate and contain them, and demand from us ‘courage to be able to measure ourselves against the seeming omnipotence of nature’.²¹ Kant had shown how the conscious mind is able to meet and rationalize the awesome challenge of the natural sublime. But the prospect of ruins in the jungle seems by contrast to stand as testimony to a crushing victory of non-human nature over the human. Sometimes, so omnipotent is nature that not even ruins are left to testify to a defeated human effort. Sailing upriver towards the decayed town of Brunei in Borneo – which would strike him, as we have seen, as exhibiting the shriveled mummy and the gray ashes of an former empire – Hugh Clifford felt that the resumption of sovereignty by ‘the spirits of the jungle’ was even merciful in its completeness. ‘Those hillsides, we knew, were filled with the memory of ancient tragedies, records of wrong and oppression, or murder and ruthless robbery; and Nature was even now slowly covering from sight the scenes of so much wickedness.’²² Here the baleful trope of ruins in the jungle is itself

turned, by the traditional pastoral trope of the restorative power of nature, and the returning jungle is seen as benign, healing, or at least covering up, wounds inflicted by human depravity.

We do not have to look far to see why Clifford was drawn to the ruins of Angkor, and what led him to conjure the story of the downfall of an empire from its stones. In his distinguished forty-five year career as a colonial administrator, he was a notably ambivalent imperialist.²³ This was not as uncommon as might be thought (Leonard Woolf in Ceylon was another such case, and went on to become a prominent campaigner against imperialism). Clifford was convinced of the material benefits of modernity which European incursions brought to Asia and Africa. But he was also aware of the tragic costs of these changes in terms of the destruction of habitats and cultures he had come to know and love in his work as a colonial civil servant in Malaya (and Ceylon). In this he was voicing an ambivalence shared by other colonial personnel, as Philip Holden has argued in his study of the contradictions of modernization and nostalgia in the rhetoric of British Malaya: ‘The British construction of Malaya seems, in hindsight, driven by two narrative imperatives: first, to justify creeping colonization of the peninsula in terms of modernization; second, to inscribe Malaya nostalgically as a medieval society...’²⁴ Clifford could appreciate in Malaya a romance which had disappeared from the modern world, but his own arrival there, as an agent of modernity, was a guarantee that that romance would soon be destroyed. In the circumstances, a reminder that no encroachment of civilization could stand forever against the forces of nature was a thought that had its consolations.

The story of the fall of Angkor is then, like Kipling’s ‘Recessional’, a warning of what may befall a proud empire – the ruins in the jungle performing the function of the emblematic skull at the feast – but there is also a sombre gratification in contemplating the mutability of secular might. In an article that makes mention of his own observations of the temples at Angkor and the uninhabited forest in Pahang, Clifford was to congratulate Leonard Woolf on his discovery of a ‘profound truth’ in his Ceylon novel *The Village in the Jungle*. ‘That truth is that, in all the long history of man in the tropics,

the Jungle has always in the end triumphed over mankind.’²⁵ Ruins in the jungle were death’s other kingdom, but in the long run all kingdoms are death’s kingdom. Kipling himself, though he never admits in his prose that the British Empire in the East might come to an end, allows this tragic insight in his poetry, notably in ‘Cities and Thrones and Powers’, a poem in which he contrives to sound like Thomas Hardy as he grimly celebrates the blindness of humans to their necessary end.

So Time that is o’er-kind
 To all that be,
 Ordains us e’en as blind,
 As bold as she:
 That in our very death,
 And burial sure,
 Shadow to shadow, well persuaded, saith,
 ‘See how our works endure!’²⁶

This is very much the moral that adheres to the trope of ruins in the jungle, whether the ruins are actual or figurative, and it is consistent not only with the ancient religious and literary theme of mutability, but also with the strange dark vein of pessimism that accompanied the imperial triumphs of the late Victorian age, perhaps best exemplified in the 1894 Prolegomena to T. H. Huxley’s *Romanes* lecture of 1893, ‘Evolution and Ethics’.²⁷ There the great evolutionist had argued that civilization was waging a losing struggle against the ‘State of Nature’ which would continue until ‘the evolution of our globe shall have entered so far upon its downward course that the cosmic process resumes its sway; and once more, the State of Nature prevails over the surface of our planet’.²⁸ As for Hugh Clifford, of course it was the power of the British Empire that had enabled him in the first place to travel to and write about the ruins of imperial Angkor. But as he contemplated the temples and palaces overgrown by the jungle, it is hard to tell if he would have been surprised, or distressed, to learn that his own writing about them would outlast the empire he served.

¹ W. Somerset Maugham, *The Gentleman in the Parlour: A Record of a Journey from Rangoon to Haiphong* (London: Heinemann, 1930) 83.

- ² Hugh Clifford, 'The Quest of the Golden Fleece', *Malayan Monochromes* (London: John Murray, 1913) 197.
- ³ Letter to Lytton Strachey, 2nd October 1908. *Letters of Leonard Woolf*, 137.
- ⁴ Julius Caesar, *The Gallic War*, with an English translation by H. J. Edwards, Loeb Classical Library (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1917) Book VI.
- ⁵ Woolf, *Growing*, 212.
- ⁶ Maugham, *Ah King and Other Stories*, 269-339.
- ⁷ Leonard Woolf, *The Village in the Jungle* [1913] (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1981) 179.
- ⁸ Rudyard Kipling, 'Kaa's Hunting', *The Jungle Book* [1894], ed. W. W. Robson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987) 22-47.
- ⁹ Rudyard Kipling, 'The King's Ankus', *The Second Jungle Book* [1895], ed. W. W. Robson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987) 104.
- ¹⁰ The phrase 'imperial Gothic' was coined by Patrick Brantlinger in his *Rule of Darkness: British Literature and Imperialism 1830-1914* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1988) 227-254.
- ¹¹ Hugh Clifford, 'A Dying Kingdom', *Macmillan's Magazine* 86 (May/October 1902) 110.
- ¹² Hugh Clifford, *Malayan Monochromes* (London: John Murray, 1913) 233.
- ¹³ Pierre Loti, *Un Pèlerin d'Angkor* (Paris: Calmann-Lévi, 1912), 118.
- ¹⁴ *Ibid.* 'So there it is, this sanctuary which once haunted my childish imagination, and which I have attained only after so much wandering the earth, when the evening of my wayward life has already come!'
- ¹⁵ Maugham, *The Gentleman in the Parlour*, 209, 213-14. Such is the pervasive power of junglification, in Maugham's account, that not only the vegetation but also the ruins themselves have become tangled.
- ¹⁶ There is no agreement among historians on a single main cause for the decline and fall of Angkor, and no doubt a variety of factors – economic, political, cultural and environmental – were involved. See Ian Mabbett and David Chandler, *The Khmers* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1995), 204-17. For other recent accounts, see for example Claude Jacques, *Angkor: Cities and Temples* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1997), Charles Higham, *The Civilization of Angkor* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2001), and David Snellgrove, *Khmer Civilization and Angkor* (Bangkok: Orchid Press, 2001).
- ¹⁷ Hugh Clifford, *Malayan Monochromes*, 245-46.
- ¹⁸ Hugh Clifford, *Further India: Being the Story of Exploration from the Earliest Times in Burma, Malaya, Siam, and Indo-China* (London: Alston Rivers, 1905) 161-2.
- ¹⁹ See J. A. MacGillivray, *Minotaur: Sir Arthur Evans and the Archaeology of the Minoan Myth* (London: Jonathan Cape, 2000).
- ²⁰ Hugh Clifford, *The Downfall of the Gods* (London: John Murray, 1911) 336, 335.
- ²¹ Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgement* (1790), trans. with Analytical Indexes by James Creed Meredith (Oxford: Clarendon, 1952) 111.
- ²² Hugh Clifford, 'A Dying Kingdom', 108.
- ²³ See Harry A. Gailey, *Clifford: Imperial Proconsul* (London: Rex Collings, 1982), and Kathryn Tidrick, 'Hugh Clifford, Administrator', *Empire and the English Character* (London: Taurus, 1992) 88-129.
- ²⁴ Philip Holden, *Orienting Masculinity, Orienting Nation: W. Somerset Maugham's Exotic Fiction* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1996) 96.
- ²⁵ Hugh Clifford, 'Mankind and the Jungle', *Living Age* 278 (July/September 1913) 162.
- ²⁶ *Rudyard Kipling's Verse; Definitive Edition* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1940) 487. 'Cities and Thrones and Powers' first appeared in *Puck of Pook's Hill* (1906).
- ²⁷ The scientific and literary debate about civilization, nature and progress is the topic of Brian Shaffer's study *The Blinding Torch: Modern British Fiction and the Discourse of Civilization* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1993).
- ²⁸ T. H. Huxley, 'Evolution and Ethics', *Evolution and Ethics and Other Essays* (New York: Appleton, 1911) 45. This bleak future is visited by the Time Traveller in *The Time Machine* by Huxley's pupil, H. G. Wells, published the following year (1895), and a reversion to the State of Nature also overtakes *The Island of Dr Moreau* (1896).