

Introduction: An Epistolary Relationship

*I will now give you in detail all that has happened
to me since I parted with you all.¹*

In the early hours of 12 May 1846, the schooner, *Mazeppa*, was lying at anchor off Wusong (Woosung), some twelve miles downstream from the bustling port city of Shanghai. Its captain, Mr Wade, was making ready to sail for Hong Kong, a six-day journey, assuming good weather, but one that would often take much longer. On board was Eliza Medhurst, setting out to join her fiancé, Charles Batten Hillier, who was about to be appointed the colony's Chief Magistrate. As dawn rose, she began writing a letter to her younger sister Martha. The first of many such letters she would write over the next ten years, this was different from all the others: not just because it was written before her wedding but also because she had only just said good-bye to "Toddles", as she called Martha. Yet, she needed to tell her everything that had happened since they had parted, just hours before. It is with this letter that we get our first insight into Eliza's ebullient and effusive character and the close and deeply affectionate relationship that lies at the heart of their correspondence.

She was seventeen and Martha fifteen, and the two sisters had seldom, if ever, been apart. It is no wonder, therefore, that Eliza

had so much to say and felt she “could have burst out crying every moment, it made [her] so miserable to think of home”. What she did not know was that they would not see each other again for five years, and for another five years after that, they would only meet on a handful of occasions. Although until now, their lives had been inextricably entwined, for the next ten years their relationship would be almost entirely epistolary. Whilst they would marry, have children, and experience the usual incidents and misfortunes of life for an overseas family, they would be reliant on their correspondence for knowledge of each other’s developing lives. In that sense, as we read the letters, we will come to know almost as much about Eliza’s life as Martha did during this period, watching her develop from a young ingénue into a mature married woman with children.

However, in another sense, we will know far less than Martha. Apart from the first letter, the surviving correspondence only begins two years after Eliza’s marriage, and she and Martha must have exchanged plenty of letters in the meantime. Martha will also have received news about Eliza from other sources, particularly from their elder brother, Walter, with whom they had the closest of relationships. Most importantly, when she read the letters, Martha will have had in mind all that she knew about her sister from their early life together: when she was being serious, when she was teasing, and what significance should be attached to the matters that were left unsaid. Even Martha, however, could not be sure that she was always reading the letters correctly and drawing the right conclusions. The lack of any actual meetings meant that Eliza could construct her own *persona*, a plausible epistolary self, knowing that she was safe from being questioned and, possibly, unmasked. Before we can draw any conclusions about this, we first need to have some understanding of Eliza’s early life and the context in which the letters were written.

Chapter 1 begins by exploring her family background and her upbringing, and that of her siblings, primarily Walter and Martha,

in the mission station of the London Missionary Society (LMS), first in Batavia (modern day Jakarta, the capital of Java), and then in Shanghai, when it opened as a treaty port in 1843. Two years later, Eliza became engaged to Charles Hillier, who had been living in Hong Kong since its earliest days as a Crown Colony. To understand how they met and the challenges Eliza faced in her early married life, the chapter goes on to examine Charles's background, the events that brought him to Hong Kong, and the way of life that Eliza encountered when she was first married, one that would be very different from what she had known when living with her parents in Shanghai. Whereas Shanghai was already developing into a relatively stable and commercially successful settlement, Hong Kong's early promise was quickly fading, and the small foreign community was already becoming enmeshed in discord and corruption, with Charles, as Chief Magistrate, being at the centre of those events. To give context to the letters, the chapter concludes by providing an overview of their life together, which ended with Charles's untimely death in Bangkok at the age of thirty-six, only months after being appointed Britain's first Consul to Siam.

Eliza arrived in the colony shortly after the opening of an official mail service between India and Hong Kong, and by 1848, there was also a regular, albeit unofficial, service between Hong Kong and Shanghai. However, apart from her letters, few examples of personal correspondence have survived from these early years, and even fewer from women.² We have, therefore, a rare opportunity to analyse such correspondence both on a personal level and in its colonial context. Chapter 2 considers the letters first as an intimate archive and then as part of a process that reflected and shaped Britain's colonial presence and familial relations within the empire. Written from Hong Kong, Shanghai, England, and Siam, as well as on her journeys to and from these locales, they provide a lens through which to view these outposts of the British World, including the "in-between places",

as Elizabeth Sinn calls them,³ and Eliza's life "at home" in the metropole. As Laura Ishiguro has argued,⁴ this sort of private correspondence places family at the centre of empire. Yet, despite its importance and the substantial scholarship on epistolary literature,⁵ Ishiguro's is one of the few studies to examine how this worked in practice. On the other hand, there has been considerable discussion about *how* such letters should be read as an archival source, with Laura Ann Stoler criticising the tendency to read such material "against the grain" of colonial conventions and emphasising the importance of "exploring the grain with care and reading along it first".⁶ However, we must also be alert to the possibility of the letter-writer using distance to shield their identity and project an epistolary self and way of life that may not always reflect the truth. For example, for four years, Minnie Wood's letters, sent from India to her mother in England, extolled the success of her marriage until, suddenly, she revealed that she had been deeply unhappy for a long time.⁷ We must, therefore, read Eliza's letters with care.

In analysing family letters, scholars have explored the way in which particular issues and topics have been discussed and how much this reflected and was influenced by the colonial context. Elizabeth Buettner, for example, has examined how the health of British children in late Imperial India was discussed in letters home and how separation between parents and children might be mediated through such correspondence.⁸ Elizabeth Vibert has shown how the exchange of letters enabled settlers to maintain connection across "the cold space of empire" and to continue to live by reference to the life enjoyed by their siblings at home.⁹ Similar themes have also been explored in a six-volume study of women writing home from various corners of the empire, an invaluable source in relation to the territories covered but of limited interest for our purposes as it does not include the British World in East and Southeast Asia, which had its own distinct contours.¹⁰

More recently, in her study of letter-writing in British Columbia “as a distinct and significant form in its own right”, Ishiguro has shown how the very banality of the contents of these letters helped to normalise the colonial presence.¹¹ Through discussion of particular subjects, such as food and eating habits, letter-writing reflected “broader concerns about place, identity, and belonging” and re-configured the incidents of family life, such as marriage, birth, and death, on the periphery of empire. However, as she acknowledges, most of her examples are letters written by men. Building on that scholarship, this book breaks new ground by focusing on the correspondence of one young woman in a colonial setting very different from that of British Columbia and on how such correspondence shaped and revised familial relations and practices and helped consolidate Britain’s presence in East and Southeast Asia.

Part II (Chapters 3–10) sets out the letters in their entirety, together with some linking commentary and notes. If, as one of Eliza’s descendants, I have an interest in the way I have read the letters, I have tried not to let that colour my approach. I have also tried not to overwhelm the text with too much supplementary detail. References are largely excluded from the letter commentary, but all sources are listed in the Bibliography. The Pen Portraits include additional details about Eliza’s family and important people who appear repeatedly, whilst notes are included only when necessary to add context and clarity. However, where the references to characters and events remain elusive, the letters are well able to speak for themselves. They end with Charles’s death and Eliza making her melancholy way back to England. However, it would be wrong to conclude the story at this point. Having come to know her so well, Part III (Chapters 11 and 12) focuses on how these experiences influenced her later life and the lives of her children. Although she would re-marry, her early life would continue to have a major impact: through her memories, through her relationships with her mother, Martha, and Martha’s children,

who would be living nearby; and through her own children, three of whom would go on to make their careers in China.¹²

How the letters came to be preserved and whether Eliza ever re-read them will never be known. Found in her papers when she died, their retention is testimony to the importance that both she and Martha attached to the relationship they sustained across the distance of empire. It was one that owed much to their happy childhood, and it is with those years that the story begins.

Part I

Intimate Empire

Evangelical Families

*I often think of Batavia—it was such a dear happy home to us all.*¹

Eliza's parents, Walter and Betty Medhurst, first met in 1817 at the home of the Lovelesses,² a missionary family with whom Walter was temporarily staying in Madras. Sent out by the LMS to join, what became known as, the Ultra Ganges Region, he was waiting for a ship to take him the final leg of his journey to Malacca, a small colonial settlement on the Southwest coast of the Malay Peninsula. Also living with the family and working as a governess to the two children was Betty Braune. Although only twenty-two years old, she had already suffered more than her fair share of misfortune. Her mother had died in 1807 when Betty was thirteen and her father, George Martin, who was an officer in the Indian Army, had married her off the following year to a fellow officer, the twenty-seven-year-old Lieutenant George Braune. Martin then left for England. Whilst the ostensible reason was to make representations to the East India Company in connection with a dispute over pay in which the Madras Army had become embroiled, it was also a convenient way of off-loading his responsibilities.³ Six years

later, in 1814, Betty's husband died, leaving her with a four-year-old son, George, to support (her other child had died in infancy). Taken in by the Loveless family but scarred by these experiences, she hesitated when the young and impetuous Medhurst began courting her. However, although zealous and evangelical, he was also debonair and persistent, and shortly before his ship was due to sail, she relented. The couple were married immediately and set off the next day. This much is clear from the family records, in particular, a letter written by Eliza's youngest sister, Augusta.⁴ What is not clear is who Betty's mother was and whether her parents were ever married.

Augusta had obviously discussed this with Betty, because, in a letter she wrote in her seventies, she says that Betty had always understood that her parents were "lawfully married" and that her mother (whose first name is never mentioned) was the daughter of a tea-planter, called Thomson. Whether Eliza had ever discussed this with Augusta or her other siblings, we do not know. The issue is not mentioned in her letters nor in the short memoir that she wrote. The baptismal records, however, do throw some light on it. On the original certificate, dated 12 October 1795, the year of Betty's birth is given as occurring one year before, on 23 October 1794. Martin is identified as the father, but the mother is stated to be "unknown". Two further "correcting" certificates have been filed, both of which have "illegitimate" inserted, and this seems to make it clear that Betty's parents were not married. Assuming that is right, it is highly likely, as John Holliday suggests, that Betty's mother (Eliza's grandmother) was of Tamil origin.⁵ Support for this may also be found in Revd Medhurst's letter informing the LMS of the marriage, in which he says:

She speaks Tamil as fluently as English and can also talk in Gentoo. Born in India and having travelled over the greatest parts of the peninsula living in tents under a scorching sun, she is