



# **AYAHS & AMAHS** **TRANSCOLONIAL JOURNEYS**

**8 September 2022 - 31 December 2023**

**EXHIBITION CATALOGUE**

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# THE EXHIBITION

*Ayahs & Amahs: Transcolonial Journeys* presents the stories, memories and histories of Indian, Chinese, and other Asian nursemaids who journeyed across the networks of the British Empire in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Our exhibition focuses upon the mobility of their lives and experiences, and of the representations and memories of these earliest global domestic workers. Their work of caring was vital to colonial and imperial projects. They helped shape the interconnected world we share today.



**Above:** 'The Sawyer Children and their Ayah, Podihami', Photograph, Wilbur A Sawyer, 1924 | The Wilbur A. Sawyer Papers, U.S. National Library of Medicine.



# DOWN MEMORY LANE

**Themes:** childhood; labour; domesticity; photographs; parenting; nostalgia.



**Above:** 'Ayah in Edinburgh', Photograph, c.1880s | Courtesy of Gael Newton (<http://photo-web.com.au/gn/>).

Caring for children was often mundane and challenging. Yet these photographs depict intimacy and immortalise moments of affection between children and their ayah or amah. As was common in photographs of children with amahs and ayahs, the parents are absent from these images. Perhaps they were behind the camera or off to one side busily choreographing these sentimental moments?

Thousands of photographs (and occasionally home videos) of ayahs and amahs were produced during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries in locations across the world. Suffused with nostalgia and sentiment, these images also underscored their labour and the crucial role they played in the home. But why were the individual names of ayahs and amahs so rarely recorded in images produced by their employers?



**Above:** 'Amah Lam Ah Sup with Valerie and Michael Hill', Photograph, Ted Hood, 1940 | Mitchell Library, State Library of New South Wales. Courtesy ACP Magazines Ltd.



# TURNING THE PAGE



**Above:** A.L.O.E, *Edith and her Ayah and other stories* (London: T. Nelson and Sons, 1872), Frontispiece.

Individual recollections of the British Raj in India combine in the one abiding childhood memory of the much loved, sari-clad ayah. It is a memory profoundly shaped by popular British children's books of the time, featuring the ayah as a central figure.

## Themes:

children's books;  
intimacy;  
protection;  
anxiety.

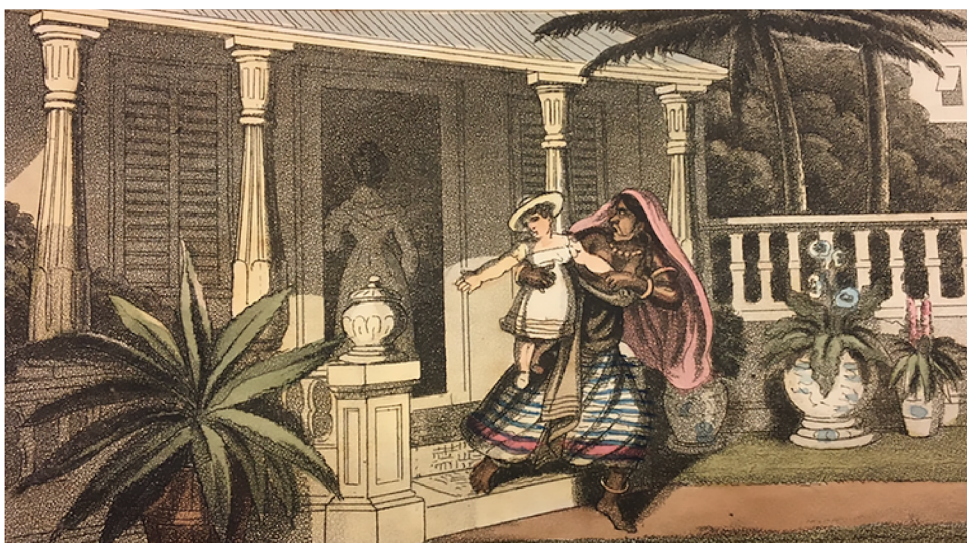


THE FAITHFUL HANNAH.

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Children in the English-speaking world became familiar with the character of the ayah even if they had never been to India themselves. The stories that were told, by women writers who were often well-travelled characters in their own right, were of picturesque carers who were tender, loyal, and very brave, willing to risk their own lives to protect their charges. But colonial anxieties surfaced in advice manuals and books for adult readers.

**Above:** 'The Faithful Hannah' from Beatrice Braithwaite Batty, *Effie and her Ayah; or, the faithful monkey and her little white mistress* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1873), p. 14.



**Above:** 'Rape of Infant' from T Little (ed.), *Confessions of an Oxonian*, vol. II (London: J. J. Stockdale, 1826), Frontispiece.

Fears that Indian women might steal the imperial offspring from under the mother's very nose suggest the insecurities that underpinned British colonial rule.



# MOVING FIGURES

## Themes:

mobility; culture;  
art; dolls;  
figurines;  
postcards.



**Above (L-R):** 'Joanna De Silva', Painting, Oil on canvas, William Wood, 1792 | Courtesy of The Met Museum | 'Amah and Child Doll', Cloth and wood doll, China, c. 1930s/1940s | Photograph courtesy of Dr. Claire Lowrie.

As ayahs and amahs travelled between colonies and metropolises, inhabiting the memories of employers and their children, they often appeared in paintings, postcards, photographs, and films. They were also shown caring for European children through statuettes and dolls that have been acquired by museums and collectors across the globe.



**Above (L-R):** 'Hindu Ayahs', Postcard, Clifton & Co., Mumbai Bombay, c. 1900 | Courtesy Victoria Haskins, personal collection | 'An Ayah', Postcard, Raphael Tuck & Sons, London, c. 1910 | PaperJewels.org | 'Half Caste Ayah or Muse', Clay Figurine, Pune, c. 1867 | Courtesy of Museums Victoria.

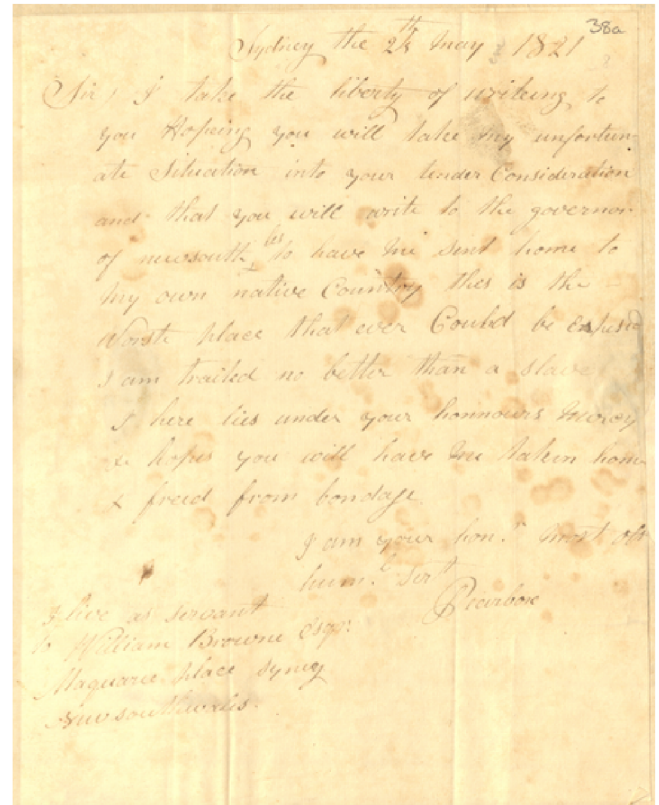


# MAKING THEIR WAY

**Themes:** agency; travel; employment; labour; conflict; exploitation; letters; passports; official records.

First hand accounts from ayahs and amahs are very difficult to locate in the colonial archives. Glimpses into their lives and experiences sometimes appear in moments when they found themselves in conflict with their employers or in contact with the colonial state.

The letter to the left is probably the earliest writing that we have from an Indian ayah in Australia. It was written by a woman called Pearbux working in Sydney in the early nineteenth century. In it, she asks her former employer (based in Calcutta) to help her return to India. Pearbux describes Sydney as 'the worst place that ever could be expected' and maintains that she is treated 'no better than a slave' by her employers. Her efforts were successful and the New South Wales colonial authorities arranged for her to return home.



**Above:** 'Letter from Pearbux to George Chisholm', 1821 | Colonial Secretary; NRS 900, Petitions to the Governor from convicts for mitigation of sentences, 1810-1826. [4/1862] p38a | New South Wales State Archives.



**Above:** 'Wong Chun Sung's Passport' | SP1122/1, 1951/24/2407 | National Archives of Australia.

Wong Chun Sung was one of around one hundred amahs who travelled to Australia from East and Southeast Asia with their employers during the Second World War. Upon her arrival in Australia in 1941, Wong Chun Sung's passport was taken from her and held by the High Commissioner for the United Kingdom. The passport and the other documents located in Wong's immigration file, including letters she wrote, offer rich insights into Wong's life and her journeys across the Asia Pacific region.



# ABOUT THE EXHIBITION

**This exhibition is a part of a project on 'Ayahs and Amahs: Transcolonial Servants in Australia and Britain' funded by the Australian Research Council.**

**The project is dedicated to studying female domestic care workers from India and China who travelled to Australia and elsewhere during the period of British colonialism.**

**These were extraordinarily mobile women, accompanying colonial families along circuits of empire between Australia, Asia, and the UK over two centuries.**

**By exploring the historical experiences and cultural memories of these earliest global domestic workers, the project aims to illuminate a broader transcolonial history of domestic work.**

**We are grateful to the archives, museums, libraries and individuals who have generously shared items from their collections for this exhibition. We would also like to thank the University of Newcastle for providing the funds that made this exhibition possible.**

## OUR TEAM

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*We acknowledge and respect the sovereignty of First Nations Peoples of the world*

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Australian Research Council funded project DP200100375

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