

Intimate Imperialism: Alan Gould's *The Tazyrik Year*

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Intimate imperialism is not unfamiliar to Anglo-Australian families. Cross-linguistic and cultural struggles may be a regular and generally good-natured occurrence, often over domestic vocabulary or which cricket team to support. The correct term for various squares of fabric may be debated – is it to be ‘face-washer’ or ‘flannel’, ‘serviette’ or ‘table napkin’? And should the evening meal be ‘supper’, ‘dinner’ or ‘tea’? Anglo-Australian children of the 1950s and 60s – and here I draw on personal experience and observation – tended to become bilingual, using British vocabulary at home and Australian speech forms everywhere else. In some families, distinctly British vocabulary, manners and cultural practices were discarded painlessly over time, perhaps retaining something symbolic, like Christmas pudding or Sunday roast. But where British-born parents were unsettled and homesick, Australian children might be brought up to believe that the British way was the right and proper way, and grow up with a kind of split consciousness not unlike that of the European immigrant child as represented autobiographically by Andrew Riemer in *Inside Outside* (1992) or Morris Lurie in *Whole Life* (1989).

The influence of British imperialism on the ‘habits of the heart’ differs from other European immigrant experience however.¹ The question of cultural authority taps deeply into Anglo-Celtic anxieties about Australian identity. Parental authority may create an inner conviction of inflexible standards to be upheld, and a sense of alienation when this is not possible.² In this paper I suggest that Alan Gould’s novel, *The Tazyrik Year* (1998), explores the complexities of ‘intimate imperialism’. The novel represents the ascendancy of British imperial ideology and culture in the domestic life of two middle-aged Canberra public servants, and its serious consequences for a third party, their unwary postgraduate tenant. According to the novel’s chronology, the two ‘imperialist’ characters would have been children in the 1950s and 60s, growing up in a domestic routine dominated by their British father, a career soldier/administrator in various parts of the British

Empire. Responses to *The Tazyrik Year* since its publication have not examined the novel's treatment of imperialism, although for Gould himself it is an important theme.

I would like to begin by placing *The Tazyrik Year* in the context of two other explorations of imperialism in Gould's writing, the first in his earlier novel, *To the Burning City* (which won the Banjo Award in 1991), the second in a letter from Gould to fellow poet Jan Owen. In *To the Burning City* two perspectives on British imperialism are presented, in a conversation set in 1973 between a young Australian university graduate, Jeb Corballis, and his elderly British aunt, Eva Hengelow. Jeb, who has supported anti-conscription protests in Australia, is shocked when Aunt Eva remarks: 'Of course it is fashionable to decry imperialism these days, but it was also a form of love, an opportunity to discover love.' Jeb responds: 'You're joking ... Imperialism is exploitation of vulnerable people. How can that be love?' (207).

Aunt Eva, who as a young Cambridge graduate in the 1930s had taught for three years in Nyasaland (present-day Malawi), does not deny that exploitation occurred, and was appalled by 'instances of cruelty and ignorance' that she saw, but was also 'moved by the evidence of love', which she describes as 'pure and real and mutual', existing 'between some individuals and the communities they were attached to' (207).

Her considered view is spelled out in some detail:

When a colonial official has strong feelings of affection, loyalty and commitment toward the people in his charge, that is one of the forms of human love. And such relationships existed throughout what used to be the British Empire ... It is disgraceful the way in which fashion has attempted to make people of different races shame-faced about these relationships. And the way we have become shame-faced about our past. I think we live in a very derisory time. People seem to turn to derision as reflexively today as an earlier age turned to sentiment. (207)

Jeb is not convinced by her point of view but he is nevertheless impressed. Aunt Eva is presented as an attractive and sympathetic character who has strong opinions but who is also prepared to acknowledge those of others. The debate is echoed in Gould's letter to Jan Owen, which was written subsequent to the publication of *The Tazyrik Year*. Gould writes:

I should make clear my feelings about Imperialism. I do not support it. That is to say, in the time while I am alive and can have a say on events, I believe a people are better off governing themselves and enjoying such prosperity as their resources and efforts allow, rather than having themselves organised by an external power that happens to have a more efficient military and civil administration and which inevitably directs a part of the colonial wealth to its own convenience.

This statement is not particularly controversial, although the complex issue of international aid as a form of neo-colonialism is not addressed. But what follows is more challenging. Gould continues:

However ... What does exercise me is the justice or injustice we visit upon the past. The past has its own necessity. The modern world went through an imperial phase. Millions of humans grew up within the values of that imperial ethos – both colonisers and colonised. These millions were, like us I suppose, more often well-disposed than ill-disposed. Whenever I hear the glib (and teeming) detractors of that ethos my impulse is to give those bygone millions a voice that attempts to allow the past a proper, inclusive, and sympathetic space in the present. I think Empire allowed the expression of a kind of human love that was generous, and probably widespread ... Empire also released a great deal of resentment, exploitation ... and unspeakable cruelties. The disaffection and exploitation are what gets documented in our era because being anti-imperialist allows a commentator to accrue kudos. We must give the past a fair hearing if we want one for ourselves. This means putting the affection, loyalties, generousities in a proper balance with the disaffection, betrayals and self-serving.

What disturbs Gould is the way in which he perceives that some contemporary writers, in uncovering histories of oppression and injustice in the colonial period, seize the moral high ground in condemning all participants in the colonial enterprise of a previous age. Gillian Beer makes a similar point in 'Speaking for the Others: Relativism and Authority in Victorian Anthropological Literature':

An effort is necessary in order to register the broader range and the subtler nuances available then ... To dismiss all Victorian writers as racist because they use vocabulary that offends us now, or because they all work within a developmental view of human history, has a further powerful disadvantage. It has the effect of absolving present-day readers and allowing us to feel enlightened. The rejection costs us no self-enquiry. (77-8)

Yet in *The Tazyrik Year* the character who articulates views on imperialism that most resemble those of Aunt Eva, or even of Gould himself in the above instance, is the enchanting Vivian Kesteven, who is shown to be a subtle and ruthless coloniser and exploiter of another human being. Vivian scorns 'all those right-thinking people who smear a past epoch with present values'. She refuses to pass judgement on any aspect of the life or values of 'Pa' and 'Boss', as she calls her parents, inhabitants of an imperial age. 'I'll take Pa whole. And Boss', she asserts. 'I will not judge either of them ... all the material and emotional luggage of their era, I'll keep alive in my

head despite the clever books and snide TV documentaries, despite all that derision' (61). It is as if Gould has created a character who takes to an extreme his position of sympathy for the minor well-intentioned players on the imperial stage, to the extent of rejecting the age that she herself lives in. In refusing to evaluate the tyrannical dimension to the imperial values of a previous generation, she perpetuates that tyranny in her own relationships.

The Tazyrik Year demonstrates the exercise of power in personal relationships by both Vivian and her brother Kit, whose shared nostalgia for imperial authority and power structures has become a kind of joint neurosis. Vivian and Kit, both in their late thirties, have secure but insignificant jobs in the Department of Foreign Affairs, and play out their unfulfilled desires in a shared private game called 'Tazyrik'. The term derives from the so-called 'Tazyrik' rug on which they played fantasy games together as children, and continue to do so as adults. The rug as Jules describes it is an exotic object from the fringes of empire, purchased by the Kesteven parents from a bazaar in Kashmir, although it was said to have come from 'the other side of the mountains' ('Tazyrik' is a fictional location):

The floor of their sitting-room was dominated by a large, opulent carpet, worn in places, but still sheeny with its original silk, and striking in the symmetries and curlicues of its design ... With its borders within borders, rectangular and diamond-shaped, its alternating colours of blue, mustardy-yellow, maroon, its flowerets and sprigs and crescents, the rug resembled the floor plan of some fabulous palace and garden ... A groundplan? Oh, it has been that,' remarked Kit. (24-5)

This rug resembles the magic carpets of Victorian and Edwardian children's stories, none more than in Edith Nesbit's *The Phoenix and the Carpet* of 1904. The children who own Nesbit's carpet have the British Empire as their playground. On several occasions the carpet takes them from their nursery to a south sea island, where they leave their Irish cook to be 'queen of the natives' (57-79). The Tazyrik rug inspires its owners in their complex imperial war games, enacted with an elaborate collection of historical miniatures, alternating with photographs, letter-writing games, jigsaw puzzles and children's books.

The Tazyrik Year is also a novel about surrogacy, shaped by the characters' desires and power relationships. The three main characters, all isolated in different ways, are seeking surrogate relationships. The postgraduate character and first person narrator, Julius, or Jules, Pyatt, is in his late twenties and in need of a home, literally and emotionally. Unsettled and lonely, he has returned from a period of European travel to embark on a doctorate in Medieval English literature, on 'the idea of surveillance in a particular group of fifteenth century romances and dream-vision poems' (16). In the everyday business of looking for accommodation he responds to an unusual advertisement, 'Wanted for a garden-flat, a scholar-tenant with a feel for the past' (9). The novel represents Jules' account of the year that follows his first encounter with his landlady, Vivian, and her shy brother, whom Jules first takes for

Vivian's husband. Viv and Kit, despite having a home and their own close relationship, also have a need for surrogacy. They wish for a child to bring up so as to renew their fantasy life as they age, and as their closeness does not condone incest, Viv must convince a third party to father a child for her.

Thirdly, *The Tazyrik Year* is a novel about diplomacy. Vivian is far too fastidious simply to find a 'stud'. The father of her child must be very carefully chosen, able to accept and even admire the oddity of brother and sister. His feeling for them must include affection and extend to compassion. He must be educated into their idiosyncratic culture to the point where his cooperation is assured. As Viv eventually explains to Jules, 'If we were going to be intimate, we had to be intimates' (196). Viv's and Kit's selection of Jules as their tenant is strategic, and their campaign both to scrutinise and to woo him is a sophisticated exercise in diplomacy, consistent with their employment in Foreign Affairs and their passion for war games. The abuse of power resides in Jules' ignorance of the scheme he is being drawn into. He innocently mistakes the diplomatic campaign for the growth of intimacy. The tragedy for Jules is that all others are excluded from Viv and Kit's shared world. Others are designated 'out-people', and that is what he remains. When Viv becomes pregnant by Jules, he is discarded.

The characterisation of Vivian is complex (and interesting), whereas Kit remains shadowy. Vivian at thirty-eight is barely middle-aged, and on the first meeting Jules is impressed by 'the lively intelligence of her eyes, the fine, almost oriental, delicacy of her cheekbones' (7). As an earthy postgraduate character later puts it, Jules soon 'has the hots for his landlady', although Jules sees himself in the role of Vivian's courtly lover, resembling the males of inferior status in his medieval romances, who admired from afar the lady of the castle. But his initial portrait of Vivian gives his desire an archetypal dimension, through images of ocean waves, forests and lines on a map. As Jules describes her:

On that first day she was wearing a corduroy bell-skirt, green, no, bright emerald in colour. It fell smoothly, flaring a little between mid-thigh and mid-calf so that the folds caught the sunlight like green ocean waves ... On top was a skiwy of forest green over which she wore a sleeveless surcoat, also green, that reached her hips ... she was wearing earrings, cabochons of malachite in which the pale and dark greens swirled like miniature contour lines on a map.' (7)

These images foreshadow Jules' later discovery of the wide-ranging and adventurous imaginations of the reclusive brother and sister, shaped by a backward-looking enthusiasm for British imperialism. Viv's sleeveless surcoat suggests the costume of a medieval knight. In some versions of Arthurian legend Vivian is the name of the enchantress who ensnares Merlin, and Gould's character also evokes John Keats's powerful enchantress in 'La Belle Dame Sans Merci'. Jules as narrator comments: 'In time I would come to construct the ensuing year in my life as though it were, in fact, an enchantment of some kind' (8). (Jules dates his 'Tazyrik Year' from August 1989 to July 1990).

Vivian is characterised as both imperious and imperial. Her brother's pet name for her is 'Rahn', short for 'Viverani Imperatrice', Vivian the Empress, her father's name for her. Her manner is authoritative, and she describes herself as hankering after the confident authority displayed by their parents, particularly in their rejection of modernity. Her ex-husband Lewis (who has a cameo role) describes her as belonging to the 'Downhill Brigade' of 'the people who cannot be coaxed out of the belief that everything is falling to pieces' (208). Vivian accepts Jules' homage of admiration, gifts and submissiveness. But Jules' postgraduate friend identifies a political dimension to their relationship, admitting that to him 'she sounds like ... well, a bit of a fascist, mate' (65).

The Kestevens's house is inherited from their parents, and a mansion by Canberra standards, 'baronial' according to Jules. Its furnishings show the 'elderly taste' of an earlier generation with imperial connections. Jules notes furniture of Indian origin, 'souvenirs of the Raj perhaps', and a Gurkha weapon which he mistakes for a holiday keepsake, to be told by Kit that 'My father served with the Gurkhas in Burma' (15). In the process of selecting Jules as tenant, the householders disclose that their father's career first as a soldier and later as an academic administrator in various parts of the non-European world, shaped their childhood in the 1950s, at the tail-end of empire. Their self-disclosure is designed to encourage Jules to reveal himself and his interests as well as to intrigue him, but the Kestevens' British imperial family history also foreshadows their colonising intentions *vis-à-vis* their tenant.

From the outset, the relationship between the characters is one of unequal power. The Kestevens are permanently employed, landlords, urban home-owners with a coast house as well. Jules is more than ten years younger, with no financial resources apart from a grant and some tutoring. He does not have a strong sense of family, and is both an only child and a foster child. What the Kestevens appear to offer Jules is intimacy: a reasonable assumption as when he moves in Kit greets him with 'Welcome to the family' (26).

The Kestevens are odd, as Viv admits to Jules, but as they disclose their oddity little by little, Jules accepts each disclosure as proof of growing trust and intimacy and adapts well to this surrogate family. As his attraction to Vivian intensifies, he becomes fascinated by their imaginative world of imperial adventure, and his uncritical acceptance of their strange ways is an indication that he is regressing into a childlike state.

Imperial miniatures

The key to the game called 'Tazyrik' is an extensive collection of historical miniatures: Victorian, Edwardian, Napoleonic, medieval, Roman, Celtic, mostly military. Even Nazi figures are represented, hinting again at the history of fascism. This interest is not altogether unusual, in that 'war-games' with military miniatures was a nineteenth-century activity that continued throughout the twentieth century and into the current one.³

Jules' introduction to the Kestevens's miniature world is strategic. After several months as a model tenant, he relates that he was 'permitted' to find the first figure. A solitary British officer on horseback, in tropical garb of the nineteenth century, exquisitely painted, appeared to move from place to place in the Spring garden over a period of weeks, as if on a journey, as was the unwitting Jules himself. The next step was Jules' discovery of Kit and Viv themselves in the garden one weekend, playing a complicated game together with armies of miniatures, acting out parts with a variety of voices, just as if they were children. According to Jules, he was permitted subsequently to visit Kit in his secret workroom and shown the entire collection, because he had responded with respect rather than derision.

But 'war-gamers' is a term that Gould's characters refuse to apply to themselves. Viv improvises an explanation to Jules: 'Kit and I are given to dipping into our further selves' but continues: 'Does the answer *have* to be adult. We're just odd. Arrested growth if you like. What we do gives us pleasure. Resonant pleasure' (76). Kit in turn reveals that 'In Tazyrik nothing is necessary ... There is no death. There is constant change but no loss. It's simple' (82).

Viv and Kit are themselves imperial miniatures, constructing themselves as nostalgic replicas of the powerful figures of a previous age. When Jules in turn tries to depict his house-companions to his friend the postgraduate historian, he explains: 'I took care to present them with a finesse, a delicacy proper to what I perceived was their unique pathos. I failed.' His friend considers them: 'A couple of pressed bloody flowers from an Edwardian nursery' (65). Yet the friend is proved wrong, in that Vivian is no dried flower. Nourished by a fantasy life that rejects death and loss, her vitality and strong will make her forceful and dangerous.

But if Viv's secret life is psychically reinforcing, for the reticent Kit it is the only sphere where he can achieve mastery. Vulnerable by temperament to bullying by others, Kit is gradually revealed by Viv to have been psychologically broken by an event in early adulthood at the time of conscription and anti-Vietnam war protests. In this core incident, Kit had appeared at a student party with the short haircut of a member of the Citizens' Military Forces, and in a cruel and drunken protest against military imperialism someone poured a tin of beetroot juice over his head, precipitating a prolonged psychiatric crisis. Jules is led to understand that Kit was only rescued from emotional paralysis by imaginative letter-writing on the part of his sister, drawing on their shared imperial fantasy world of extraordinary dangers experienced and overcome. From that point, 'Tazyrik' games, and her own continued participation, are represented by Viv as vital to Kit's psychic survival.

Furthermore, in the course of conversation with Jules, Kit reveals their own much-admired Pa as capable of careless cruelty towards his son, in a mock-William Tell incident apparently unknown to Viv. Kit recounts an occasion where Pa, possibly drunk, ordered his seven-year-old son to stand in front of an oak tree like the son of William Tell, while he and a military friend waved a loaded revolver in his direction from an upstairs window. Kit describes himself as wandering off in confusion and later returning to find a bullet in the bark of the tree just where his forehead had been. Viv's incredulous questions to Kit as to whether the episode fell within or

outside the Tazyrik game illustrate the extent to which reality and fantasy are confused in the imaginative lives of brother and sister.

These and other narratives from their past point to deep-seated emotional damage to Kit, and also to Viv. After revealing the beetroot-juice incident, Viv is subject to a paroxysm of grief about the horror of modern times. Although Viv characterises her father to Jules early on as ultimately 'innocent', 'impervious' seems a more accurate reading, based on the stories told by his children. Imperviousness is a characteristic that Viv and Kit also demonstrate towards the individual in their power.

The stories which Viv and Kit feed to Jules are ambiguous. The latter is in no position to evaluate these narrative episodes as 'Tazyrik' or 'non-Tazyrik' but accepts them at face value. Gould hints at a narrative ambiguity reminiscent of Henry James by naming the postgraduate historian, his most down-to-earth and emotionally whole character, Quint, after the sinister ghostly servant in *The Turn of the Screw*. As a literature scholar, Jules represents his younger self as resisting postmodernist theory, but his narrative demonstrates characteristics that he claims to have rejected, for example that 'there could be nothing knowable about the human past that was not hopelessly distorted by the obscuring reflections of the present' (34).

The 'fascist' element in Viv's character, which Jules has denied, comes to the fore at the climax of the narrative, when she becomes pregnant by Jules. As she foreshadowed, she requires him to 'buzz off'. He has served his purpose in her imperial scheme. Should he refuse to leave willingly, Vivian's contingency plan involves the use of force, either the police or their father's revolver, in an ironic reversal of the image of a shotgun wedding. A warning about potential violence has already been embedded in the narrative. Kit, whom Jules had adjudged as 'peaceable', has shown a marked capacity for violence in one of the Tazyrik tales, where he ruthlessly and efficiently twists a knife in the body of a captor (103).

With the pregnancy confirmed, Jules' intimate relationship with Vivian and blossoming friendship with Kit are revealed as a sham, nothing more than a diplomatic strategy. Jules had been a resource, a surrogate, courted simply to renew the lives of the Kesteven household. He is to be entirely excluded from this renewed community, and the fruit of his Tazyrik year, the child, is to be appropriated. Vivian and Kit's colonisation of Jules is complete.

At the end of his 'Tazyrik year', Jules is a pitiable character, confused, angry, deeply unhappy. His fantasies about continuing to belong in the household are unviable because the definition of an 'out-person' is as fixed as that of race or gender within an unjust power structure. Although he has bonded closely with Viv and Kit, he can never become a Kesteven: their loyalty is only to each other. Jules' inner life and will are damaged beyond repair, illustrated by his inability to pursue even the projects that do not depend on his relationship with the Kestevens, his teaching and his research. He loses his 'feel for the past'. Instead, he relates that 'the past now made me feel over-exposed and fatigued' (211). His narrative voice becomes flat and colourless. Salvaging what he can from his psychic devastation, Jules concludes that he does not have the inventive powers to write a thesis or a novel, and retrains as an

educational technology consultant which, if Gould's earlier novel *Close-Ups* (1994) is any indication, is adjudged little better than a used car salesman.

Although the narrative concludes at this point, five years after the 'Tazyrik year', the novel's structure is circular, in that the first chapter recounts Jules' return to Canberra and his anonymous viewing of the 'Outcome', his four-year-old daughter playing in the yard of her pre-school. As an observer he takes pleasure in spotting similarities between the bossy little girl and her imperious mother, but has no desire to initiate a relationship. He reflects: 'I was confident I felt no attachment, no pangs ... Nor did I feel responsible. Between myself and the parties involved there had been a silence on the issue during the intervening years, a silence by no means heartless, a silence that had been agreed upon' (3).

The narrative as a whole contradicts Jules' view: the silence does appear heartless and Jules's passivity more sinister. After engaging so deeply with the past of the Kestevens, he now refuses to engage with his own past and prefers a technological work environment where 'the new was forever being replaced by the newer' (6). As a result of the colonisation of the Tazyrik year, Jules no longer has the capacity for forming deep attachments, unlike Vivian and Kit, whose uncritical attachment to an imperial past is embodied in the lives of their parents, from whom they have failed to separate emotionally. In refusing to grow up, and with a narcissistic ability to inspire affection without reciprocating, they are shown to succeed in getting their own way. For them intimate imperialism brings its rewards, with another family member, continuity with the past and renewal on their own terms. For the colonised Jules the consequence of intimate imperialism is a radical discontinuity with the past, a complete rupture with his former self. And intimate imperialists, like the imperial power-brokers whom they resemble, see no need to say sorry.

But who has the last word? Jules refers to his loss of interest in the past, his inability to write a novel. Yet Jules is the first-person narrator of this complex narrative purporting to be an account of his past life with Viv and Kit. This narrative reproduces their Tazyrik fantasy letters, which he describes himself as having secretly photocopied, as well as keeping a journal. The narrating Jules tells their private stories, exposes their secret life. In sharing their secrets they have placed themselves in his power: Jules has not gone away quietly but has 'blabbed', breaking the implicit contract of the Tazyrik year. The narrative voice is disingenuous, and the novel may be interpreted as an instance of the 'empire writing back' (to use Ashcroft, Griffiths' and Tiffin's memorable title).

Even more oddly, the inclusion of several imaginary dialogues between Jules and Vivian suggests that the colonised Jules has developed his own version of the 'Tazyrik' letters. As Vivian said of the first Tazyrik story by letters shown to Jules: 'It's all code, Jules. It's a story that *was* invented to grow around a ... a real story and make it heal. The letters were a way of dealing with something ... With an incident ... which was atrocious in its way' (54). Jules' narrative, the novel that he claims he could not write, appears to break the Kesteven's code to reveal not only the atrocious incident in Kit's past, but the atrocious sequence of events in his own story. Jules' narrative indicates the novelist's sleight of hand, by which the novel is not only an

exploration of a many-layered intimate imperialism, but also of the art of fiction. When Vivian first discusses a 'Tazyrik' story with Jules she is slicing onions. Any interpreter of *The Tazyrik Year* must attempt to do the same.

Notes

Shortly after this paper was delivered, the author noted the recent publication of a similarly titled work, *The Intimate Empire: Reading Women's Autobiography*, by Gillian Whitlock (New York: Cassell, 2000).

- ¹ This phrase represents the title of Robert N. Bellah's, *Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life*.
- ² See for example the representation of 'Grandpa', John Buxton, in Kathleen Fitzpatrick's autobiography, *Solid Bluestone Foundations*.
- ³ Internet sites exist, and a festival for war games enthusiasts was held in July 2000 at the Canberra show-grounds, at the time this paper was presented. At Blenheim Palace in Woodstock, Oxfordshire, a gift of military miniatures to one of the Dukes of Marlborough was on display in the main entrance hall in May 2000. Interest in war games was fostered in some public schools at least to the 1970s: war games displays could be viewed at Eton College on their '4th of June' open day. A small boutique called 'The Armoury' in London's exclusive Piccadilly Arcade currently supplies 'military and civilian miniatures', indicating a continuing interest in the hobby among the well-to-do.

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