# Visually Narrating Postcolonial Lives

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This paper is from a project called "Landscapes of Belonging in which British sociologists Caroline Knowles and Pauline Leonard, and American sociologist and photographer Douglas Harper explore cultural aspects of global mobility, the means by which people attach themselves to culturally unfamiliar landscapes, and the pervailing spectre of history over the lives of global lifestyle migrants.

In the following images and text we explore the relationship between an old British soldier and the places and people shaping his present life as a migrant in Hong Kong. The old soldier's life includes a cast of ghosts produced by empire and war. To these are added the ghosts and memories brought by his Chinese wife, Poly, who fled China in the Cultural Revolution.

In the background of this paper is the contemporary significance of the British empire. It suggests the spatial dynamics of globalization in the context of personal biographies and the historical landscapes on which they operate. It suggests that white Britishness has a complicated and unexplored relationship to empire and the contemporary forms of migration.

**Jack** takes the bus everyday from his 27th floor flat on City One Estate, a high-rise housing estate the size of a town (50,000), in the New Territories, to the Royal British Legion – now renamed (post 1997) the World war II Veteran's Association. This is a difficult journey. It takes over an hour and involves at least two hot, noisy and crowded buses moving through the dense Hong Kong traffic. Since his fall last year, his wife Poly travels with him each day. Here Jack services the living:

> *… We cater for about 900 [ex-service] men [mainly Chinese] who use the clubhouse ... they come and play mah-jong and meet and just a place to gather, it's a welfare place … we look after them when they go sick.*

And archives the dead:

> *… picking up the pieces … all the enquiries, trying also to fill in the gaps, because there is no end of gaps to be filled in ... people who would like to find the answer … I'm like an encyclopaedia they say. I know exactly where to put my hands on the enquiries I still get, for relatives, people who were buried here.*

Poly was a dancer with the Beijing Ballet who escaped during the Cultural Revolution with a small baby to join her husband in Hong Kong. He disappeared when she arrived, leaving her to fend for herself and her small daughter by teaching ballet. Hers is a particular kind of migration story and shows that categories of migration distinguished by policy-markers to determine those deserving of new homes, like 'refugee' and 'economic migrant' bleed into each other.

Jack had been in Hong Kong at the end of the 2nd World War gathering up the bodies of those who died in Japanese prison camps.

> *... they brought their bones and remains back from Taiwan to HK while I was here you see…in huge containers ... I had to go to the ship and meet it with my colonel ... suddenly we were told they were bringing them all back. We realised why, because while we'd buried them they were near the surface and we couldn't cover them up ourselves …*

It is the unfinished business of war that 'keeps calling [Jack] back' to Hong Kong, and so in 1963 Jack secures a contract with the then colonial HK housing authority to manage the mushrooming public housing estates produced by slum clearance. Half of Hong Kong's [almost 7 million] people


*Jack was used to being photographed. I made at least 20 images as he told familiar stories of his life as a champion of forgotten soldiers and prisoners of war, maltreated and murdered by the Japanese in WWII.*

live in some form of public housing.

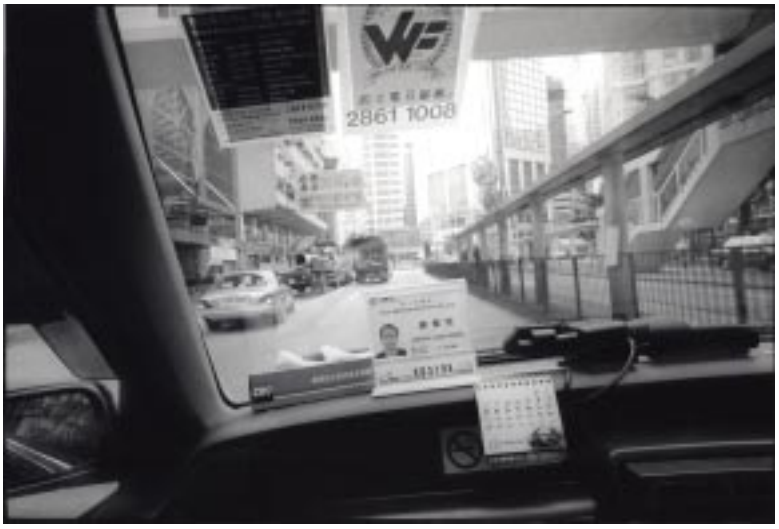
> *I feel when I go up to the cemetery, and I go so many times, that they know. It's a funny thing to say. I'm convinced that they know. Because when I first went back there, when I came back [in 63] … now I shall never forget going in there ... I didn't know where they were ... my 600 odd … It was Saturday, I was on my own … I was walking down the pathway and all I could hear was a Scotch voice, sort of crooning: 'Sai deer to me, said dear to me, aye sai deer to me' and I thought my god I know that voice … and the further I got down the more it came louder and suddenly I heard a voice say 'natsu' in Japanese. That's number seven ... And I looked round and there was this stone – Anderson – seven was his camp number ... we had to learn our numbers … they were all around him. All the blokes I was looking for. And I thought my golly you've brought me to where they are ... so that made me think that time, that Saturday ... there's a reason for me coming back … I've got to make my time in HK count … that place seemed to draw me. Always something happening to do with it ... It's been a tool for me: given me a reason for living ...*

> *That's been good therapy for me [too] you see, getting down to the Legion, because I'm living you see while I do this work. ..*

**'My name is Jack Edwards. I'm from Wales'**

Thus Jack introduces himself at the beginning of his autobiography '*Banzai you Barstards!'*. The book takes us deep down into the physical and mental landscape of Jack's own wartime experiences, as a POW in Taiwan in the Second World War. The three years when Jack was a prisoner was to have such a profound effect on his life that he was never able to settle again in

*Jack's story is a molecule of history preserved in a throwaway building under a freeway in downtown Hong Kong. I waited for Jack to emerge, helped along by his wife Poly for our journey to the cemetery.*




*Caroline sits crammed in the back seat with Jack and Poly. I share the front seat with the cabbie who drives us to the cemetery. He knows Jack's history and waits respectfully while we visit the graves of Jack's fallen comrades.*

Wales or indeed anywhere else in the UK. Although in many ways his sense of national identity has remained, and perhaps even strengthened, he was pulled back to South East Asia by a complex web of emotional, psychological and political threads. Here, it appears, is the only place where the continued performance of his national identity makes some sort of sense, and brings some sort of psychic comfort.

In Sept 1939, Jack joined up with the Royal Corps of Signals 53rd/38th (Welsh) Division Territorial Army. In 1941, his section was transferred from Scotland to the last army base before the Malaya/Thailand border. It was not long however before the Allies were forced to commence a retreat southwards towards Singapore. After the eventual fall of Singapore, Jack and his section were interned in what was to be the first of three POW camps in which Jack was to spend the whole of the remainder of the war. Each successive change of camp was like sinking down further down the levels of a mine: each level got darker, more treacherous, and more difficult to exit.

His first camp was the notorious Changi jail. Whilst the internal conditions in the camp were appalling, worse was the daily work routine, which consisted of disentangling massacred Chinese men, women and children from the barbed wire into which they had fled, dragging them to the beach, and digging their graves. After several months of this, Jack and his section, all of whom were by now quite seriously ill, were put on a ship bound for Taiwan. Jack's memory of the landscape of arrival is vivid:

*Poly helps Jack affix his medals. Their loving relationship played into the moment: Jack very near the end of his days, and both of them understanding the shape of their end game.*

> *After what seemed another endless nightmare, we reached the top of a hill and could see, down in the distance, the sea and a cluster of buildings. This was our destination, Kinkaseki. (p45)*

The copper mining camp of Kinkaseki was to be where Jack was to spend the next two years. Together with enduring the harshness of the physical conditions was the difficult emotional task of coming to grips with a changing sense of his national identity, and what it now meant to be white and British:

> *I remember wondering what was going through the minds of the {Taiwanese villagers} as they watched the first examples of the British Army, a ragged, dirty, unshaven, hollow-eyed, straggling column of stumbling men. Our Japanese guards reacted to the yells of the huge audience by redoubling their screaming, shouting, pushing and prodding of us towards the school playground. Herding these white men like cattle, they must have felt proud, like Roman Emperors of old parading their spoil and prisoners before welcoming citizens. (p45)*

At Kinkaseki, Jack and his fellow prisoners sink to a new level of horror. Inside the camp, they received daily beatings, often with weapons. Their rations were meagre: one scoop of rice a day, which they had to eat in a squatting position. Each man was picked off in turn for sessions of more extreme torture, such as the Ice Box. This was a cell too small to lie down in, and in which prisoners were forced to take up an unnatural stance: stand on one foot, keep their arms up in the air, for days on end. As Jack describes:

*Jack had posed for this picture many times before and patiently tried several positions as I sought to place him against the monument in a way that would transcend the cliché awaiting the photo.*

*'men came out of the Ice Box broken in health, shivering, bruised and battered'.*

Worse however was the work in the 'hellhole of Kinkaseki':

*In single file we were pushed and marched down into the dark unknown … Oh that long walk in the same dark dreary tunnel each day. We got to know every loose plank and broken sleeper as we picked our way in the pitiful pool of light ... down we went, getting hotter and hotter. After four flights, we found another tunnel with two sets of trolley lines and could see a cage operating to the surface. Instead of stopping as we hoped down we were taken down again, the steps becoming rougher and the ceiling lower until we were nearly bent double. There were cries of pain all around me as others, like me, caught backs or arms on the jagged walls and low ceiling. I will never forget the first morning. I thought we were descending into hell.*

This was to be the daily workplace for Jack and his progressively smaller group of mates, who had to slog hard for long hours every day, being beaten if they did not deliver enough ore. Jack survived it appears due to his tremendous courage and spirit. He learnt Japanese and became something of a spokesman for his group. The daily grind was only punctuated by regular beatings, periods of torture, or sickness and often a death of a dear friend. Completely cut off from the outside world, they had no idea of the progress of the war. It was a shock then when in May 1945, the men were suddenly told to leave the camp. As Jack says: *'We were on that road at last, away from that bloody mine!'*

After another long, difficult and painful journey, they made it to' Jungle Camp'. This was to be

*Jack points to where his comrades lie. We ask him to tell us the circumstances of their deaths and the process through which their bodies came to lie in the Hong Kong cemetery. Frantic Hong Kong hovers in the distance like a mirage.*

perhaps the worst camp that Jack had been in: another level down in the mine-shaft of his captivity, and yet another version of 'hell'. The food was even more meagre, the beatings more frequent, and regularly really brutal, the work even more intense. Then, all of a sudden, it was over. The day came when the Japanese did not appear to take Tenko, the roll call. On the ship home, however, Jack was saddened and outraged by his treatment by some of the *British* officers:

> *The only sour note in that period of bliss was a visit from a very pompous British officer. He was not interested in our hardships, but wanted to know how much money we had been paid by the detaining power... the use of [these] words for those Japanese bastards struck us as very funny*

After the war, Jack was in his words, a 'marked' man, unable to settle in the UK. It was in many ways a huge relief when he was asked to return to Singapore to assist on the War Crimes Investigation. For complex reasons, Jack needed to return to the scenes of his abuse, be near the bodies of his comrades and even re-establish relations with the Japanese. Jack may have token political freedom to choose where he wishes to live, but he has no psychic freedom.

The ghosts of empire and war structure Jack's relationship to HK. Ghosts operate **in** place **out of time,** and pose important questions about the relationship between the living and the dead; about the force of unfinished business in everyday life; about the status of the past in making the present and the future. In *Sources of the Self* Charles Taylor (1989) argues that we make our lives - biographically and socially - in conversation with the thinkers, the prophets and the dead composing our milieu. The past actively constitutes the present. Jack's bus trips to the Legion, how he spends his time there, his spatial relationship to the city, the global routes he navigates in attending commonwealth conferences, petitioning for war memorials, his frequent trips to Japan through Taiwan in pursuit of a Japanese apology and compensation. He is well informed about

*I sense the quiet vibrations of the dead and wonder, Is this the case only in military cemeteries?*

current Japanese politics, has Japanese friends and goes there frequently. His work, his campaigns, his connections and his intimate relationships reconfigure the ethic and racial boundaries which achieve a fixity in postcolonial literature. How the colonial tribe comports itself on post colonial landscapes is no straightforward matter. Jack swims with the tide of lifestyle migration but his life – like the others we have spoken to – is infinitely more complex than it appears on the surface.

CItations:

Charles Taylor (1989) Sources of the Self Cambridge: CUP

Jack Edwards (1996) Banzai You Bastards London: Souvenir Press

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