

Maya's World

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Oxford: Town and Gown



Oxford, the town of *dreaming spires*, after a poem from 1866 by Matthew Arnold, is Maya's birthplace.

Here, her father's family has been rooted for generations – in this town where, at many corners, time seems to have come to a halt a hundred or more years ago.

A town that has made history and that is dominated by its university, the oldest in the English-speaking world.

Richard Francis Burton also attended the University of Oxford, at Trinity College – like mentioned in the prologue of *Beneath the Saffron Moon*, introducing himself with the challenge to a duel before failing with his plan to duck out of a career in church by getting rusticated for attending an illegal steeplechase; instead he got himself expelled.

Burton spent roughly two years in Oxford, and during this time, he made friends not only with Gerald Greenwood but also with his daughter Maya, then still a little girl.

This unlikely friendship is in parts inspired by Charles Dodgson, better known as Lewis Carroll, living in Oxford at the same time, and Alice Liddell, daughter of the dean of Christ Church College; for her, he wrote *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*. But the friendship of Burton and Maya complies as well with what is recorded about Burton's life. He had a good rapport with children; in spite of his sinister looks, they like him right away, and all his life, Burton preferred to surround himself with people considerably younger than him.



Maya Greenwood was already fully developed as a character (including her name), her background and family story written, when I learned during further research that Richard Burton had resided as lodger with a Dr. Greenhill in his first year at college. There, a guest sparked his life-long fascination for the Arabian language.

One of these little anecdotes in which historical fact and writer's imagination flow into each other.

Often my novels start with a prologue singling out a meaningful event from the childhood of the protagonist. One with far-reaching consequences, that also lays the fundament for the main storyline – because I

am convinced that I am only able to understand a character fully when I know where she or he comes from, what kind of influences or experiences had shaped her or him early in life.



Balliol College - after J. le Keux, 19th century

Another idiosyncrasy of my work is to draw up elaborate family trees for the main characters of a novel, already long before the first sentence of a novel is written. For practical reasons alone: by that, I have all the dates of births, marriages and deaths, all family relations always ready at hand. But above all, these family trees give me a feel for the close environment a protagonist experiences from birth – for his or her roots.

In my imagination, the Greenwoods are a long-established family with old traditions: in every generation, there is at least one doctor; the eldest son is always baptized either Jonathan or John – and Aunt Dora always celebrates her birthday with a garden party in March, regardless of the weather.

The Greenwood family tree starts in the eighteenth century with Maya's great-grandfather Jonathan Greenwood: a doctor, of course, father of five children from his wife Mary. His eldest son John became also a doctor and even has a small appearance in the prologue as Maya's taciturn grandfather. His wife Alice, whose unusual eyes Maya inherited, died in 1816, only thirty-nine years old. And in the portrait Maya's grandfather cherished so much, she wears the fashion of the Regency era – which from the point of view of the Victorian period really must have looked strange.

John jr., the eldest son of John and Alice Greenwood, was a doctor at the hospital in Oxford; both of his sisters married well: Elizabeth married Mr. Hughes and moved to Bath, and Dora the wine merchant Edward Drinkwater (pun intended!).

Gerald, born in 1801, was somewhat different from the rest of the family: he studied ancient languages and history – but at least he got to a professorship at Balliol College.



Two generations of fashion - Harper's Weekly, July 1857



St. Giles Church - after J. le Keux, 19th century

The Greenwoods innately were not rich, but neither poor; their pecuniary resources were sufficient to live comfortably, at a certain standard.

I enjoyed depicting a good middle-class family, who indeed did employ domestic staff but considered them as part of an extended family and above all, still did a lot of things themselves. Maya washing and dressing her hair herself would have been unthinkable in a rich household – even less in a family of gentry or nobility, since there would have been a maid for this task.

In other ways as well, the Greenwoods were more a family of good manners than one of stiff etiquette – e.g. compared to the Garretts, subject to more strict etiquette rule, having only recently raised to nobility.

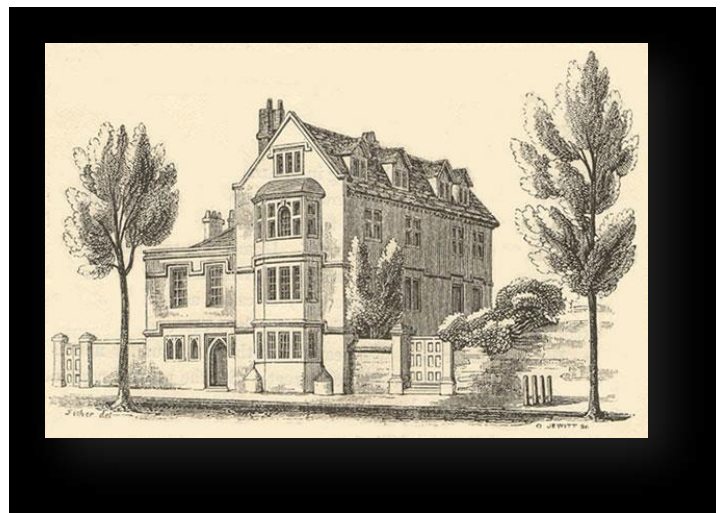
Gerald's income as professor was sufficient enough to move from the crowded town center to the fringe of town. Although for him this meant a longer trip to his work at Balliol, a larger, more presentable house was essential in his position, necessary to house guests, to entertain scholars and students, as was expected from a professor.

After the initial research, I already had a clear vision of the house Maya grew up in. Enchanted it had to be, a tiny bit gloomy, and above all, very Victorian - and with a garden.

And I wanted a church nearby, whose clock counts Maya's hours, whose bells accompanies her days.

At St. Giles Street I found such a house – a good address in Oxford, even though not as genteel as for instance Beaumont Street where Amy Symonds lived.

There was not only a church, St. Giles, but also the kind of house I was looking for: Black Hall, at St. Giles Street No. 23. Not only located perfectly, but also with a lovely name and in addition resembling almost uncannily the house I had in mind for the novel.



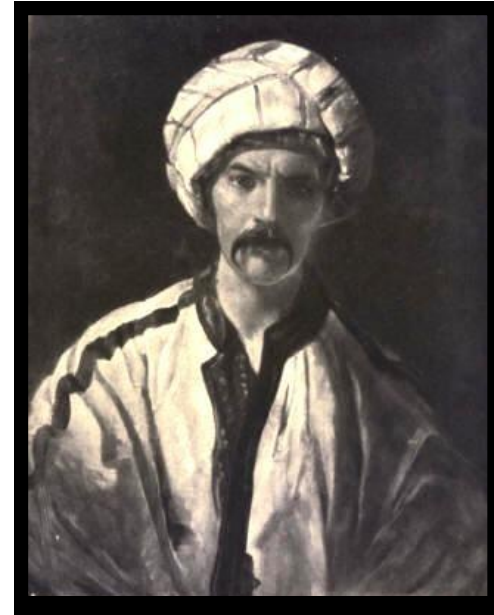
Black Hall

Dreams of the Orient

Due to the friendship with Richard Francis Burton, Maya starts dreaming of the Orient.

Arabia, Africa, India entice him to travel and explore while he is still a student in Oxford. To learn and master the languages of these lands, to experience and study the customs and practices of their peoples, to dare to explore territories no European before him had set foot on – that was his obsession.

Dreams he shared with little Maya, and dreams she made her own.



Burton fulfills his dreams and goes to India, staying abroad for an eternity – at least this is how Maya perceives his absence as a girl and as an adolescent –, before he travels to Mecca in the disguise of an Arab and afterwards returns to India as a soldier.

Maya expands her longing for Richard to the foreign and mysterious lands, until she cannot distinguish anymore what her main object of her desire is.

She is hungry for every detail Richard writes her about in his letters: views, cultures, fragments of foreign languages, experiences, anecdotes, thoughts on land and

people. Because of him, Maya even forces through to learn Arabian, against her mother's wishes. Always hoping that one day, she will be able to travel there – just like Burton.

Although she is aware that as a woman in the Victorian era, it is unlikely that she ever will be able to travel as boldly and freely as Burton does.



Shepherd's Hotel, Cairo - P. Sebah, ca. 1880



Cairo - L. C. Tiffany, 1872



Along the Nile - E. Lord Weeks, ca. 1895

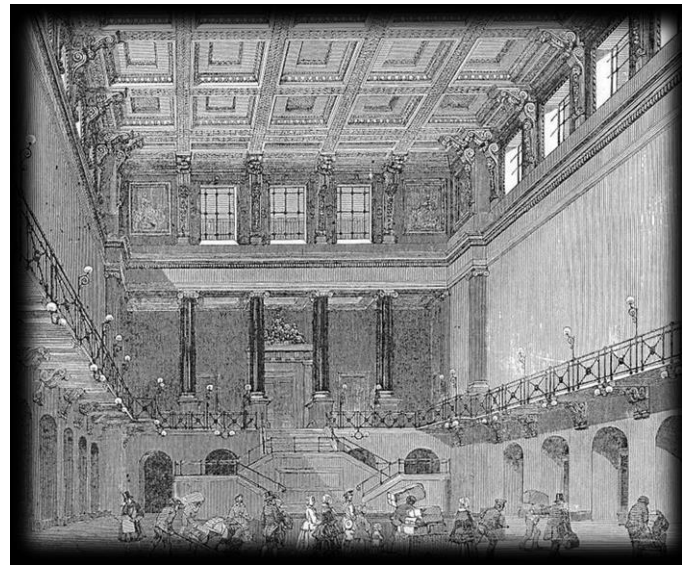
Maya's brother Jonathan has been in India over the last three years, too. We meet him for the first time at Euston Station, London, trying to catch his train to Oxford – together with his travelling acquaintance Ralph Garrett.

Both know how to describe vividly their impressions of India – tales Maya is thirsting for but leave her even more hungry for seeing and experiencing everything herself.

Jonathan's stories center around Calcutta, the capital of British India, situated on the banks of the Hooghly. Here the power of the British concentrated; here the largest garrison of the army and the headquarters of colonial administration were located.

Calcutta was a city preparing itself to equal European metropolises in splendor and lifestyle, its buildings, streets and European society shaped by the Empire but nevertheless with some Indian flair.

Ralph's India is different from Jonathan's: less lush, less colorful, above all less British. His North of the country is more barren, characterized by the mountains and populated by other tribes than the Bengalis.



Euston Station



Calcutta, ca. 1850

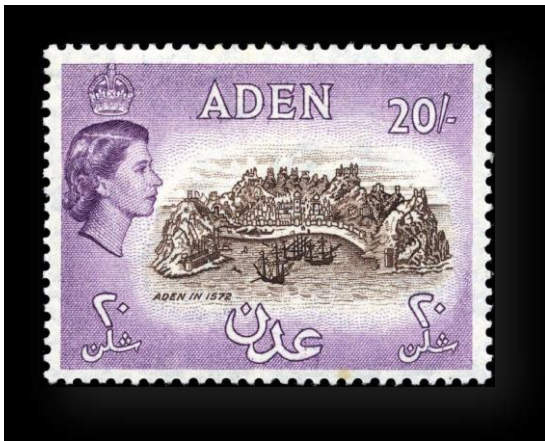


Banks of the Hooghly, Calcutta



Main Street, Agra, ca. 1858

Aden: The Eye of Arabia

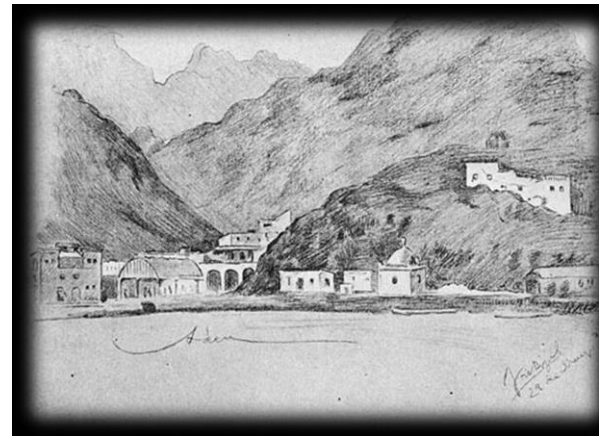


For many years, I only associated with Aden the stamps in the collection I used to have as a child, originating from the business mail of my great-grandfather: monochrome, bicolored at the most, in pale red, a green like moss, in lavender and blue, with drawing of ships and rocks in the middle, tiny portraits of Queen Elizabeth II. or her father, George VI., in one corner. That Aden had been British crown colony well into the Sixties was a fact I knew – but this was really all I knew. I couldn't remember having read anything about Aden, ever, neither as fact nor as fiction.

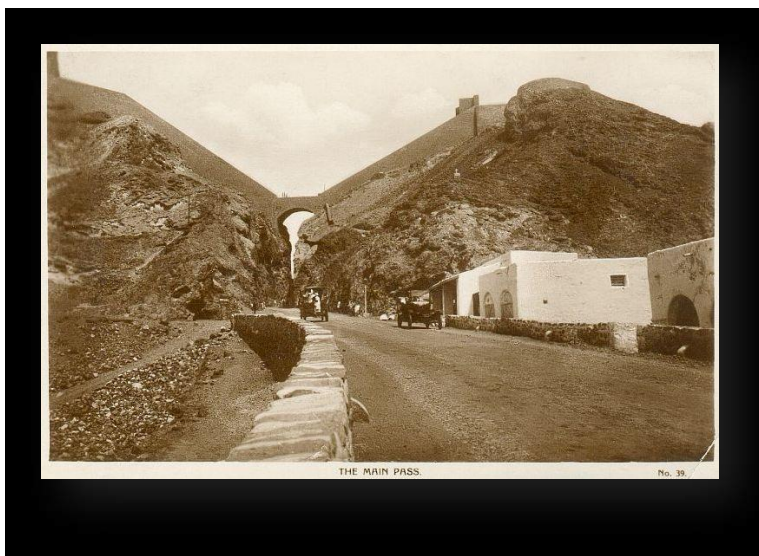
On my inner map of the world, Aden was a blank spot.

In my vision, Ralph always wore a uniform of the British Army in India during the nineteenth century. But I've already spent some time there, in that period, that place, with the last chapters of *The Sky Above Darjeeling*; with my next novel, I wanted to travel elsewhere, to see and experience a different world.

I leafed through my historical atlas, looking for a different country where the British Empire had soldiers at that time. And I discovered the tiny corner in the south west of Arabia, marked as occupied by the British: Aden.



Aden as seen from the waterfront - J. Rizal, 1882



Gate on the access road to Aden, early 20th century

On this map, the outlines of the Arabian Peninsula were drawn in color, assigning regions to certain countries or kingdoms. The interior though was white: no man's land, from the perspective of nationality.

The Rub' al Khali came into my mind, the vast desert in the heart of Arabia, of which I had read some time ago.

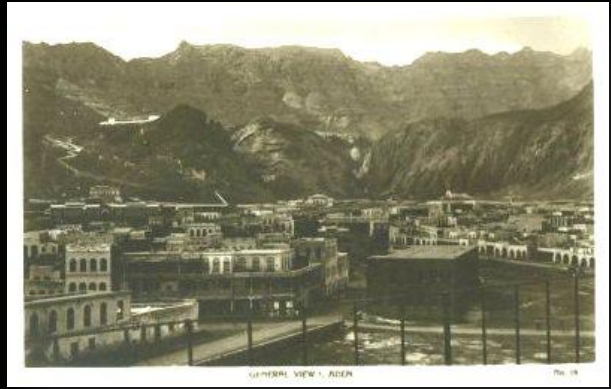
Desert, no man's land, Bedouins, Arabian tribes ...

Out of these cues, a story took shape inside of me.

But something was missing.

Somewhere else I had come across Aden, without giving a second thought about it. I sifted through everything I had just read, all the newspapers and magazines, the books. Although at first it didn't seem to make any sense, I turned to a book I had bought only recently: another biography of Richard Francis Burton - who had fascinated me already for some years.

And Burton had been in Aden several times.



Aden, late 19th century

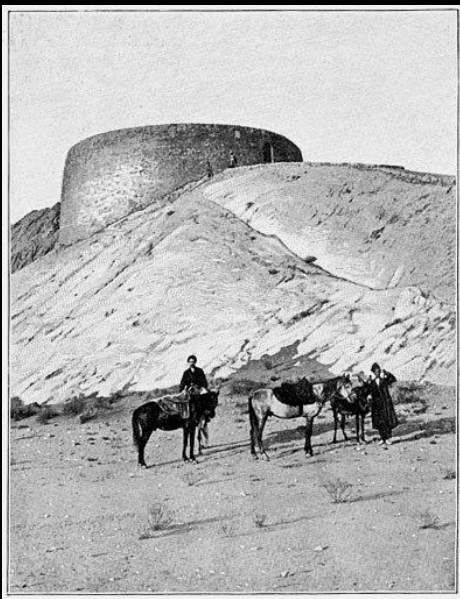
With him, I had found the missing piece, the second half of my story: Maya and Richard – two halves complementing each other perfectly and blending into another.

And Aden became a location for the novel.

The more I researched Aden's history, the more I was astonished that there was hardly any literature about it. Aden had such a checkered, thrilling fate, dating far back into the past, and the occupation by British troops was dramatic, a real adventure – nothing could have been more fitting for the story I had in mind.

Moreover, Aden also offered a unique backdrop for this chapter in Maya's life: the massive rock wall of the Crater, oppressing like a nightmare, the town inside as much confined as protected by this wall. Partly British garrison, partly a town of Arabs, Indians, Jews, tortured by a murderous climate. Close to the sea, the vastness of Arabia in its back – and sultanates at war with each other; belligerent Bedouins and the sandy heart of the Rub' al Khali: the land of the Queen of Saba and of *One Thousand and One Nights*.

A perfect matter for the novel I had in mind.



Tower of Silence, ca. 1900

Bath: A safe haven in crisis

Whenever I think of Bath, ladies in Regency dresses of sheer fabric and with a high waistline come into my mind; dashing gentlemen in tight pants at a card table and droll elderly ladies curing their gout in the health spa while tittle-tattling and playing match-maker.

To me, Bath is a city out of the novels of Georgette Heyer and Jane Austen: nostalgic, romantic and above all very, very English.

In those years *Beneath the Saffron Moon* takes place, the novels of Jane Austen were bought and read, but they were neither bestsellers nor did they cause storms of enthusiasm.



The Victorian reader preferred more drama, more contrasts.

It was not until the 1880s that readers took again fancy to Austen's novels, the early twentieth century loved them and since the 1990s, her novels have not only seen a renaissance, but by several movie and TV adaptations and literary spin-offs a second heyday.

Because Austen was not fashionable in those days but considered sentimental and even a bit boring, I wanted Maya's unconventional Aunt Elizabeth to be an enthusiastic reader of these novels.

In addition, she had moved to Bath.

Not in any random street, any haphazard house, but at Sydney Place No. 4 – where Jane Austen had resided some time during her six years in Bath.

In this house, Maya finds refuge. The first time immediately after she has returned from Arabia, and the second time amidst her biggest personal crisis. Aunt Elizabeth's home is a safe haven to her, a place where she feels understood and protected – and twice, this house offers neutral ground for encounters as feared as hoped for.



And here Maya pulls one day a novel by Austen out of Aunt Elizabeth's shelf: *Persuasion*, mainly set in Bath – and in my opinion, Jane Austen's best novel.

Image sources: P. 2, p. 3 above, p. 4, p. 5 above, p. 7 below, p. 8 above, p. 9 above and below: Author's collection; p. 2 above after J. le Keux, 19th century; p. 9 center Cassandra Austen, ca. 1810: via Wikimedia Commons; p. 3 below, p. 5 center and below, p. 6, p. 7 above and center, p. 8 below: Wikimedia Commons.