

Kalimpong Kids: The New Zealand story, in pictures

By Jane McCabe. Dunedin: Otago University Press, 2020

RRP: \$35, ISBN: 978-198-859-236-7.

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Kalimpong Kids is a rare book. Written by historian, Jane McCabe, this book recounts the history of a scheme which managed the emigration of mixed-race children from Kalimpong and North-Eastern India to New Zealand. The scheme, which began in 1908 at the insistence of Dr John Anderson Graham, went on till 1939, the view across this time being that ‘mixed-race people ... were “undesirable”’. The plan, however, did not go on continuously and was halted from 1929-1938 due to numerous governmental and geo-political reasons. The Anglo-Indian children were shifted from St. Andrews Colonial Homes which was later renamed into Dr Graham’s Homes. The first two graduates who found their way to Dunedin were Leonard and Sydney Williams. Although Dr Graham’s initial wish was to settle these children across the British Empire, New Zealand proved to be the only country where the Kalimpong Kids could settle down.

Dr Graham, a Scottish Presbyterian Missionary stationed in Kalimpong, aspired to provide the children of mixed ancestry in British India with a future which was secured and free from the vulnerabilities which awaited them in British India because of multiple colonial laws. The book sets out a course to uncover the history behind the relocation of the children, who were sent to New Zealand to achieve for themselves, the benefits of Western education and to rid themselves of any possible effect due to racial mixing in India. Dr Graham’s Homes were located in a beautiful location around Mt Kanchenjunga which has retained its magnificence to this day. Dr Graham like many others of his time, was worried about the future of the Anglo-Indian children who were results of the British men getting intimate with native women from the regions where they were stationed in. Dr Graham believed that to ‘rescue’ the children from the ‘harmful effects’ of colonial India, the solution was not to help these children get acclimatised within the Anglo-Indian community, but rather in sending them abroad.

The boys sent to New Zealand were supposed to start working as farm labourers while the girls were supposed to begin their lives afresh in New Zealand as domestic helps. The birth families of these children were supposed to be left behind in India before they were settled with families known to Graham personally. This was one of the aspects, which was unique to this particular relocation arrangement. This scheme was particularly favourable to the British workers and managers because it effectively paved the path for shrouding their sexual contacts with the natives in India. This was because the government of British India, at that time, had laws which did not look very kindly at children of mixed ancestry and the mixed-race couples. These children who were sent to New Zealand were scattered through out the country, intentionally for purposes of maintaining discretion. In this regard, it is worthwhile to quote a passage from McCabe’s book:

Because of colonial anxieties about the racial composition of populations, Graham suspected that children with lighter complexions would have a better chance of success in New Zealand. But the children of tea planters – the men who pressured him to find placements abroad for their children and provided funds for him to do so – often inherited their mothers’ darker complexion. To mitigate colonial concerns about this, Graham presented the emigrants in ways that emphasised their assimilation into Anglicised modes of dress, grooming and deportment.

The book paints a vivid picture of the everyday life of the tea plantations in colonial India. The major attraction of the book takes root from the social location in which the book is based upon, Kalimpong and the tea estates of India, which have suffered from decades of underdevelopment in post-colonial India. The photographs of these regions from the colonial era contribute towards the transformation of the work from a mere work of history to a work of 'art' filled with graphic imagery and colonial nostalgia. While the idea of colonial nostalgia and its impacts on post-colonial nations can be debated at length, one cannot but appreciate the intense amount of work which the author has done to bring forward the narrative.

The fathers of these children were mainly plantation workers and tea planters stationed in the region. However, the mothers of these children came from multiple ethnicities. As McCabe reports, the mothers of the children were composed of Lepchas, Nepalis, Bengalis, Assamese, and others. The social and intimate lives of these inter-racial couples remain shrouded in mystery because of the taboos associated with these couples in British India, both to the then settlers and the natives. The author has produced certain images though of these plantation colonies through the photographs of their bungalows situated in pristine landscapes which add to the overall value of the book. Some of these bungalows still stand, and some have even been converted into government offices after 1947. It is worthwhile to mention that while the exterior of many of these bungalows have been altered to a great extent, the interiors often have retained their colonial legacy in toto.

In New Zealand, the lives of these children were not a path laden with roses. While most of the boys who grew up to become men joined the New Zealand Expeditionary Force (NZEF) during the First World War due to the social issues associated with the transformation from farm labourers to farmers, the women found it particularly difficult to shift professions. Their situation was further worsened by the Great Depression which followed the First World War. Even after that, these people faced hardships in their lives because of the shifts which they had to endure because of the changes in the nature of colonisation in India. As McCabe recounts, the group which arrived from India in 1938 after Graham's meetings with the then New Zealand government headed by the acting Prime Minister Peter Fraser, found it difficult to adjust to life as farm labourers as opposed to the clerical jobs which they were accustomed to as Anglo-Indians back in British India. However, they too went on towards serving in the NZEF during World War II, which paved the path for white-collar jobs in the future. The condition of women this time was different to how it had been during the World War I, as women too joined hands with the men in war efforts.

The Indian Independence in 1947 and the subsequent partition of British India into India and Pakistan placed Anglo-Indian communities in British India within particularly trying circumstances. Many of them emigrated to Britain, New Zealand, Australia, etc. The Kalimpong Kids retained a lifelong association with the homes, which initiated their transformation from Anglo-Indians to New Zealanders, as well as with India in multifarious ways. By the decade of the 1950s, as McCabe writes, these children were well settled in New Zealand, but their ancestral histories remained repressed, the very purpose which informed the cause of this book. Dr Graham's homes still continue to function in independent India with certain alterations serving the cause of Anglo-Indian children, the numbers of whom have decreased considerably since 1947.

Overall, *Kalimpong Kids* successfully combines historical writing, socio-cultural analysis and an anthropological recounting of the shared impacts of colonisation on both the British and natives in India. The book depicts the lives of the children of these interracial couples in vivid details, covering issues of parentage, social exclusion and collective colonial anxiety about the effect which mixing with the natives might have on children with British genes. It also brings forward the issues associated with ‘Managed Freedom’, which was a common colonial gesture towards people who did not fit in perfectly with the coloniser-colonised dualism. This reviewer’s only critique of the work, taking into full account the difficulty associated with garnering archival material related to an event which was supposed to be ‘under wraps’, is that the gender aspect of resettlement of the Kalimpong Kids could have been dealt with in a bit more details which would have only added to the already existing intellectuality of the work.

Kalimpong Kids takes the readers from New Zealand to the distant and picturesque locations of Eastern and North-Eastern India. The author of this review, who himself comes from the district of Cachar in the state of Assam in North-East India, which has found some mention in the book, finds the book well written and accessible to the general audience. The reviewer would prescribe this book to anyone who finds oneself interested in the social lives of people in British India and the impacts of colonisation.