Larry

A NEW BIOGRAPHY OF
LAWRENCE DURRELL
1912–45

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MICHAEL HAAG

Profile Books

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EDITOR'S NOTE

Spirit of Place

MICHAEL HAAG'S *LARRY*

Michael Haag thought and wrote about Lawrence Durrell for the best part of four decades. His fascination with Larry's work and life began, like most readers, with *The Alexandria Quartet*, which for twenty or so years after its publication (1957–60) gave Durrell a towering reputation in modern fiction; he was nominated eleven times for the Nobel Prize in Literature, and lost out only to uncontested giants like Samuel Beckett and Jean-Paul Sartre. But for Michael, it was the Durrell milieu – the settings of the novels and the travel books, the spirit of place, or *deus loci* – that was key, as indeed it had been to Durrell himself. It was a concept that Larry had in turn adopted from D.H. Lawrence, and it is at the essence of his best work, as it was, too, in that of his friend and fellow traveller, Henry Miller. You see their worlds – Egypt, Greece, France – differently after reading their work, and that was all the more true when they were writing, in an age largely before television.

Michael began his own writing career with guides to the Mediterranean, and Durrell's work had been a beacon in his exploration and immersion in its culture. Then in Egypt, while writing and publishing his own (superb) travel guide, Michael came upon E.M. Forster's *Alexandria: A History and Guide*, which had performed a similar role for Lawrence Durrell. Michael approached Larry to write an introduction for his reissue of the Forster book, and thus began an association that led to Michael publishing, with Faber, *The Durrell-Miller Letters* (1988), the thirty-five-year correspondence between Larry and Henry Miller.

The *Durrell-Miller Letters* were edited by Ian S. MacNiven, whom Larry had chosen as his biographer, and whose magisterial *Lawrence Durrell: A Biography* was published in 1998 by Faber, eight years after Larry's death. Michael's own magnum opus, *Alexandria, City of Memory*, came six years later – a book charged with *deus loci*. It was a biography both of the city and of the three writers who had charted its uniquely cosmopolitan course

through the first half of the twentieth century – the Greek-Alexandrine poet Contantine Cavafy, the novelist E.M. Forster (who spent the First World War in the city), and Lawrence Durrell. It was an inspired concept and brilliantly executed, forged with Michael's street-by-street knowledge of the city, and by a series of interviews, including, notably, Eve Cohen, Larry's Alexandrian second wife. It is no exaggeration to say that it gave a new and revelatory context to *The Alexandria Quartet*.

It was therefore no surprise that Yale University Press, who had published *City of Memory*, suggested Michael write a new biography of Larry, using his intimate knowledge of Durrell locales, and taking stock of much new publishing about Larry and his circle. It was a formidable undertaking, for Michael was determined to do something very different to Ian MacNiven – and to write a book that was again imbued with 'spirit of place'. Michael worked on the commission through the next fifteen years, right up to his premature death in 2020. During this time he had been occupied by other commissions – books on the Templars and Mary Magdalene, and the Durrells in Corfu. These were to some extent distractions, though his work on the Templars was pertinent to Larry's later works, especially *The Avignon Quintet*.

The Durrell scholarly community – of which Michael, with his regular blog articles on Durrell matters*, was a generous member – were saddened not only by Michael's death but by the fact that his long-awaited biography would not see the light of day. However, Michael's brother Anton and his daughter Veronica had followed his progress with *Larry* (as Michael called his project) and set out to explore the labyryinth of files and folders on his computer. It turned out that a good part of the biography – covering the most compelling years, in Michael's opinon – was, more or less, complete. As Michael's long-term editor at Profile Books, I was asked to review the work. It was immediately clear that it demanded publication, and I offered to undertake the work needed to prepare it for print. Here, at last, is the result.

The first twelve chapters, which were essentially ready for publication, with solid endnotes, cover Larry's childhood in Burma and India and education in England, his bohemian life in London and Paris and his friendships with Henry Miller and Anäis Nin, and, of course, the famous idyll of the Durrell family's move to Corfu – a time that Michael reveals had darker origins,

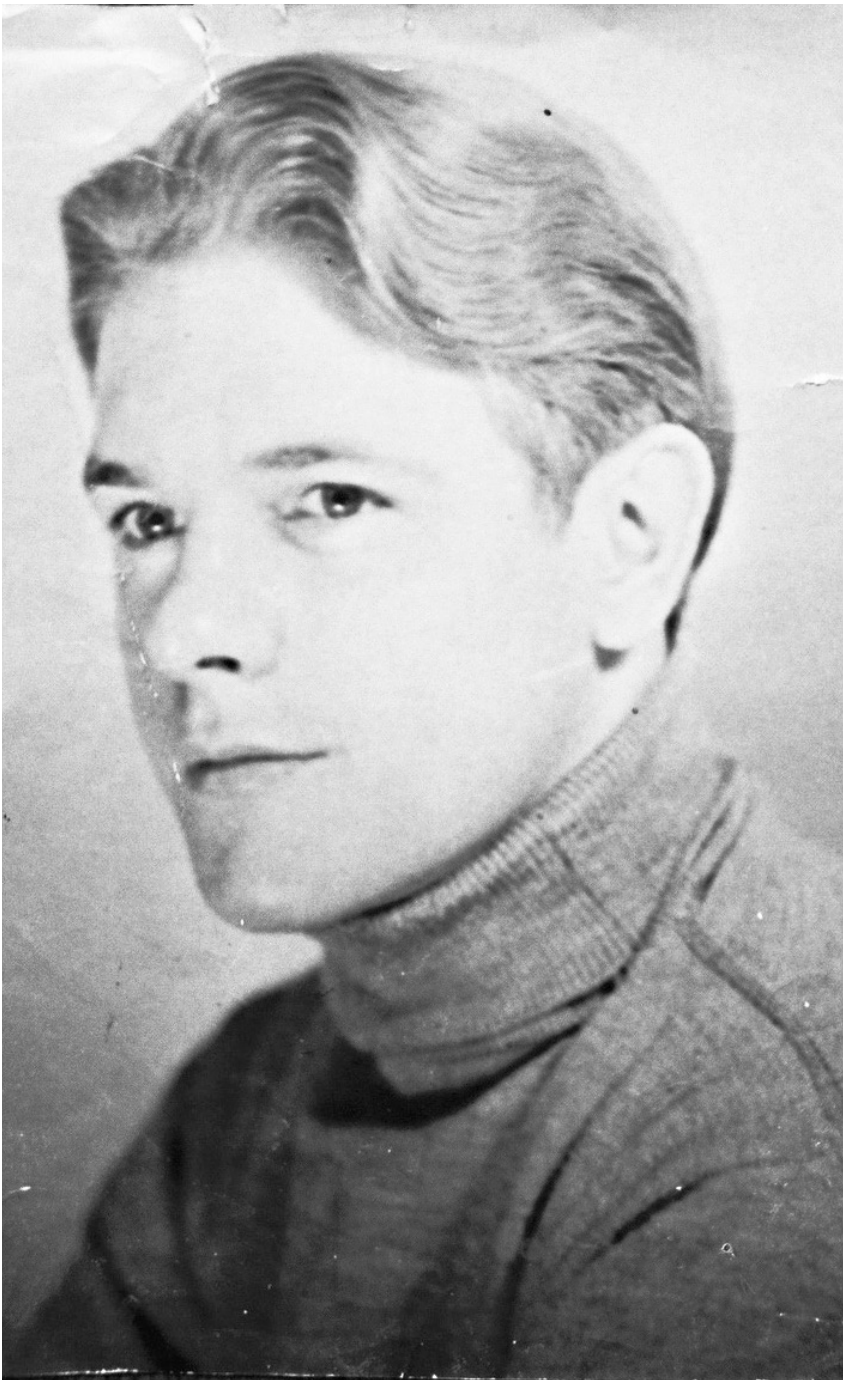
* Michael's blog remains online and can be accessed at *michaelhaag.blogspot.com*. The articles, published from 2008 to 2019, include a trove of Durrelliana.

with Larry transporting his alcoholic mother and siblings to prevent the family's collapse. Michael completed, too, the chapters continuing this narrative – Larry's work in Greece as the war approached and his dramatic escape by caique to Egypt with his wife Nancy and daughter Penelope. At this stage of the book's writing, Michael looked back to his files for *City of Memory* and adapted the Durrell chapters for the biography, cutting some sections and adding and amplifying others. Past readers of *City of Memory* may be disappointed to find much here that is familiar. But the truth is that Michael's work on Durrell in Alexandria was so outstanding that there was little that could be improved upon, and, of course, his text charts a course to understanding Larry's greatest achievement, *The Alexandria Quartet*. Those novels may have been completed in France in the 1950s but they were lived in Alexandria during the war.

Michael's completed work on the biography ends with Larry's journey from Alexandria to Rhodes in 1945. However, it seemed wrong not to append the Epilogue to *City of Memory*, which covers Larry's move to Cyprus in 1952, where he began in earnest to write *Justine*, the first novel of the *Quartet*. And as an introduction to the book – and a considered overview of Larry's life and work – I have included Michael's obituary of Lawrence Durrell, written for *Deus Loci: The Lawrence Durrell Journal*.

Working on Michael's text, I have edited as lightly as possible, occasionally excising digressions that broke the narrative more than Michael might have intended. I have honed and sometimes expanded the footnotes and endnotes, and excavated Michael's many Dropbox folders for the photos he had accumulated to illustrate the text (photos were important to Michael), and in places added extras. Many of the photos in this book were given to Michael by Larry himself, by his daughter Penelope and his second wife Eve, and also by Lee Durrell, who has long managed her husband Gerry's estate, while running the Durrell Wildlife Conservation Trust in Jersey. I am grateful to Lee for approving their use. Finally, I owe a major debt to Karl Orend of Alyscamps and Salamanca Press, who read the text with an expert eye and provided an invaluable bibliography that takes in the spectrum of books by and about Lawrence Durrell and his circle of writers. If you finish this book, and wish to continue the Durrell narrative, here are a myriad of possibilities.

Mark Ellingham, Editor, 2025



Lawrence Durrell, c.1932.

AN INTRODUCTION

A Life Abroad

*AN OBITUARY OF LAWRENCE DURRELL**

Lawrence Durrell lived nearly the whole of his life on the islands and littorals of the Mediterranean. In 1935, at the age of twenty-three, he left England for Corfu, where two years later he finished his first serious novel, *The Black Book*, his chronicle of 'the English Death' which T. S. Eliot called 'the first piece of work by a new English writer to give me any hope for the future of prose fiction': though, for fear of an obscenity prosecution, it was thirty-eight years before it could safely be published in Britain. In *The Black Book*, Larry said, 'I first heard the sound of my own voice,' but not until 1957, with the publication of *Justine*, was that voice heard by the wider public. *Balthazar*, *Mountolive* (both 1958), and *Clea* (1960) followed, completing *The Alexandria Quartet*, which made Durrell world-famous.

Larry was born in India in 1912; the families of both his parents had lived there for generations. His father was a civil engineer who was contracted for engineering work on the mountain railway to Darjeeling and who later built the Tata Iron and Steel Works in Jamshedpur in the 1920s. At the Jesuit College in Darjeeling where the Himalayas filled the horizon and he could see Everest from the foot of his bed, Larry lived 'with a kind of nursery-rhyme happiness' until, against his mother's wishes and his own, his father sent him 'home' for a public-school education.

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* Michael Haag wrote this obituary for *Deus Loci: The Lawrence Durrell Journal*, Volume NS 1, 1992. It stands here as an overview and in place of an introduction.

He never took to England. At St Edmund's, Canterbury, he chafed against the constraint, refusing to study subjects he did not like and failing three times to pass the Cambridge entrance examination. At his father's early death his mother settled in Bournemouth with her three younger children. Propelled out the door with: 'You can be as bohemian as you like but not in the house. I think you had better go somewhere where it doesn't show so much,' Larry moved to Bloomsbury with the ambition of becoming a writer. He made friends with the poets John Gawsworth and Mulk Raj Anand, and married Nancy Myers, a painter at the Slade. To supplement his small inherited income she went on the stage while he played jazz piano in a Soho nightclub, a career abandoned when he leapt out of the window during a police raid.

Bohemianism was beginning to pall, and the English climate, whether social, cultural, or meteorological, provoked Durrell throughout his life to a range of invectives. England was a manicured countryside of 'expurgated prose-land'; its population 'sneezing voluptuously in each other's faces in a continuous cycle of reinfection'. 'The energy of the English is not spiritual but social,' he wrote, swiping even at his hero D.H. Lawrence, who 'stressed his parentage out of sheer annoyance that he was not born a duke'. Where England constricted the sensibilities, he said, the Eastern Mediterranean opened them out.

The story of the Durrell family's migration to Corfu is told (with some licence) in his brother Gerald's comic masterpiece, *My Family and Other Animals* (1956). Reduced by the climate to 'a series of illustrations from a medical encyclopedia', they were willingly cajoled by Larry into leaving what he called 'Pudding Island.' Corfu was the closing of a circle. It could almost have been the setting of his childhood. Here Larry said he was reborn.

While Gerald was collecting scorpions and leeches, Larry was gathering a remarkable collection of 'uncles': Eliot, Henry Miller, George Katsimbalis, and the poet George Seferis, who later won the Nobel Prize. Durrell had written enthusiastically to Miller after reading his succés du scandale, *Tropic of Cancer* (1934), and soon the older man became his literary father figure, lifetime friend, and correspondent (*The Durrell-Miller Letters, 1935–80*, was published in 1988). Influenced by Miller, Larry wrote *The Black Book*, receiving encouragement and

admonitions – when he considered expurgating it for publication in England, Miller wrote: 'On that grain of faith on which you built your book you must rest. You stand firm and let the world come round.'

Visiting Paris in 1937, Larry was welcomed by Miller and Anäis Nin (supreme accolade: he was permitted to peep at her diaries) who together were to oversee *The Black Book*'s private publication (1938); and in London he met Dylan Thomas and Eliot, who nurtured Larry's lifelong association with Faber & Faber. When eventually Larry lured Miller to Greece in 1939, he introduced him to Katsimbalis, an outsize Athenian literary figure and raconteur, immortalized in Miller's finest book as *The Colossus of Maroussi* (1941).

The years 1937 and 1938 were a time of simple happiness, described in Larry's mosaic portrait of Corfu, *Prospero's Cell* (1945), the best of his island books. Years later he said, 'I shall really never, never ever forget a youth spent there, discovered by accident. It was pure gold. But then of course there may be a little element of self-deception in it because youth does mean happiness, it does mean love, and that's something you can't get over.' It was an isolated, primitive, strangely serene life, excluding the wider reality. The epilogue, however, tells of the toll of war, of friends dead, made refugees or sent fighting on distant fronts, and the house, once 'our unregretted home, a world', bombed. 'The loss of Greece has been an amputation': by then he was already in Alexandria and Greece had been overrun by the Nazis. In April 1941, with the Germans at his heels, he escaped from Navarino with his wife and ten-month-old daughter Penelope by caique to Crete and then to Egypt.

Cairo was the clearing-house of war and Durrell found himself an exile amongst exiles. Old friends like Seferis and Xan Fielding arrived from Greece and new friends were made, among them Patrick Leigh Fermor, Lord Kinross, Reggie Smith, and, later in Alexandria, the dancer Diana Gould, who became the wife of Yehudi Menuhin. (When years later Menuhin, fifty-six, paid Durrell, then sixty, a visit in France, they performed their morning yoga exercises together: 'He can play the fiddle standing on his head! I can't write poems yet in this position but there is no reason why in the long run I shouldn't manage to.') With Robin Fedden, later Deputy Director-General of the National Trust ('His trouble was that he always wanted to be an English gentleman'), and Bernard

Spencer, he edited *Personal Landscape*, one of the few literary periodicals of interest to appear during the war – its contributors including Keith Douglas, Olivia Manning, Robert Liddell, Seferis, Terence Tiller and Gwyn Williams.

While still in Greece, Larry had wanted to join the RAF, but his knowledge of Greek and the Greeks made him more valuable in the press attache's office of the British Embassy in Athens. In Cairo he became Foreign Press Secretary, a liaison with the Greek press in Egypt. Rommel's approach drove Nancy, with Penelope, to Palestine; the marriage was already under strain and she did not return.

In 1944, as head of the British information office, Larry was posted to Alexandria with its large Greek population. On the verge of land and sea, with its back to Egypt and the Corniche blown by winds from occupied Greece, Alexandria was claustrophobic and painful for its reminders of his youthful idyll. What he missed most about Greece was what he called 'the Eye': 'Nowhere else has there ever been a landscape so aware of itself,' recording and humanising everything within it. Larry, refusing exile, insisting on belonging (the quality which gave all his books such a powerful sense of place), became that Eye: 'All indeed whom war or time threw up/ On this littoral and tides could not move/ Were objects for my study and my love.'

For the majority of people 'Alexandria was a dull hole: "There is nothing to see!" they repeated endlessly'. But Durrell had the benefit of three guides, one the poetry of Constantine Cavafy, to which Katsimbalis and Seferis had introduced him, another E.M. Forster's *Alexandria: A History and a Guide*. Stationed in Alexandria during the previous war as a Red Cross volunteer, Forster had known Cavafy. Inspired by the poet's vision, 'at a slight angle to the universe,' Forster wrote what is really the exploration of an immense ghost city through which the personages of a more than two-thousand-year history pass as though players in a pageant. For Cavafy the past, whether that of ancient kings or his own demeaning love affairs, was drawn into a single Alexandrian sensibility, timeless for being rooted in memory and place. Rekindling in his Eye the long-blind Pharos, the fabled lighthouse of the Ptolemies, Larry glimpsed 'the phantom city which underlay the quotidian one,' where nightclub dancers and Antonys, *commerçants* and Cleopatras, dissolve

into one another, just as Tiresias, in Eliot's *The Waste Land* – Larry's third guide – melts from one character and sex into another. After leaving Egypt in 1945 for Rhodes, he wrote to Eliot about a 'big book' that was germinating in his mind.

For all that Egypt had stored up material for the future, leaving it was like 'a cloud lifting.' Larry was Public Information Officer for the Dodecanese, 'not exactly Governor of these twelve islands, but damn near,' and by caique he surveyed his new domain with Eve Cohen, 'a strange, smashing, dark-eyed woman' of Alexandria, who became his second wife. The Greek homecoming was a happy and busy time; while writing for, editing, and supervising the publication of three daily newspapers in English, Greek and Turkish, he also wrote a novel, *Cefalu* (1947, later published in America as *The Dark Labyrinth*), set in Crete, and began work on the second of his island books, *Reflections on a Marine Venus* (1953). But both he and Greece had lost their innocence; destruction, poverty, and, on the mainland, civil war, introduced a dark undertone, a note of sad reality to his book about Rhodes, reflected in the central image of the marine Venus, dredged up from the harbour where centuries of sea water had worn away her once-sharp features, so that she seemed 'focused intently upon her own inner life, gravely meditating upon the works of time ... the preoccupation of a stone woman inherited from a past whose greatest hopes and ideals fell to ruins.'

In 1947 the Dodecanese were united with Greece and Larry's job came to an end. He had hoped to go to Athens but was posted instead to Argentina as lecturer for the British Council ('Everyone with any sensibility is trying to get out of this place, including me'), and in 1949 to Belgrade, as embassy press attaché. 'Communism,' he wrote to Miller, 'is something so much more horrible than you can imagine: systematic moral and spiritual corruption by every means at hand ... And the smug cooperation of the intellectuals is also terrifying! They are paid to shut up – and they have.' Against a background of threatened Russian invasion and cut off from any meaningful contact with the population, life was circumscribed by the embassy rounds, the milieu for the hilarious Antrobus stories of social and diplomatic idiocies, appearing as *Esprit de Corps* (1957), *Stiff Upper Lip* (1958) and *Sauve Qui Peut* (1966).

In 1952, aged forty, Larry determined that it was now or never if he was to write the book that had been evolving since Egypt. With just enough money saved to buy a house in Cyprus and survive for a year, he quit the foreign service. Everything immediately went wrong. Eve had a breakdown and returned to England; the cost of maintaining her there and refurbishing his old Turkish house at Bellapaix near Kyrenia depleted his resources; and for a time he had to raise his young daughter, Sappho, while making the long dawn drive to Nicosia where he taught in a Greek school. He rose at 4.30am, and by candelight, writing by hand rather than typewriter so as not to disturb his sleeping daughter, he pushed his new book along sentence by sentence.

Though his wife rejoined him, the marriage soon failed. Then began the EOKA bombing campaign for Cypriot union with Greece; again Larry took up an appointment as press officer to the British Governor and, after being shot at in a local taverna, had to give up his home for the capital. But in the summer of 1956 he wrote to Miller: 'I have just finished a book about Alexandria called Justine ... I had fallen into a bad patch of distress and apathy after Eve left for England in the middle of August with the child, which I miss, and by a stroke of luck ... a lovely young Alexandrian tumbled into my arms and gave me enough spark to settle down and demolish the book. (She is French, Claude, a writer with something oddly her own.)'

1957 was Durrell's annus mirabilis in which not only *Justine* and *Esprit de Corps* were published, but also his adventure story for young adults, *White Eagles Over Serbia*, based on his travels around Yugoslavia, and *Bitter Lemons*, recounting the joy turned to tragedy during his years in Cyprus. For Larry the bitterness was acutely personal as the Greek world was once again and finally denied him.

With Claude, Larry settled in France in 1957 and remained there for the rest of his life. Claude was his ideal wife. He respected her intelligence, relied on her organising ability, enjoyed her humour, and was delighted that she gave as good as she got. In 1967, as he was writing the *Tunc*/*Nunquam* novels (1968 and 1970, later published together as *The Revolt of Aphrodite*), she suddenly died. The darkness of those books and what some felt to be their sterility might partly have been due to this blow.

A man of warmth, charm and humour, Lawrence Durrell had a good-natured and resilient response to life. He was not a tragic novelist – and indeed revealed less of himself in his novels than in his poetry and island books – though death was a rising theme throughout his work. After Claude's death he embarked on the most ambitious challenge of his career, writing *Monsieur* (1974), the first in a quincunx of novels (*Livia*, 1981; *Constance*, 1982; *Sebastian*, 1983; and *Quinx*, 1985), together known as *The Avignon Quintet*. It was a difficult time, marked by concern over what the critical response to his new work would be and by his daughter Sappho's suicide.

The spiritual death which Larry had earlier found in England he now found throughout Western civilisation, its materialism a trap, its theology a sham, superficially attractive but self-devouring, destructive, dominated by the 'death drift.' No orthodoxy can serve the truly religious man, as Durrell was, and in *The Avignon Quintet* the quest is for the treasure of the Knights Templar, a treasure not material but their gnostic understanding that ego and will are the sources of illusion, and must be surrendered before life's mystery can be comprehended and made whole.

In an Alexandrian poem Larry had written, 'As for me I now move/ Through many negatives to what I am,' and *The Alexandria Quartet* was a movement through negatives, a stripping away of illusions. In *The Avignon Quintet* the assault on ego and its supposed reality is greater; there is a complete breakdown of character, narrative and structure.

But, after the enormous popularity of *The Alexandria Quartet*, Larry's favour in the English-speaking world declined, though it remained high in France and elsewhere in Europe. Larry's word-magic and copiousness and his readiness to experiment placed him outside English literary tradition, just as his lifetime's 'exile' detached his work from peculiarly British social concerns. But to his readers struggling to follow *The Avignon Quintet* he offered this epigraph to *Quinx*: ' ... must itself create the taste by which it is to be judged ... Wordsworth *dixit*.'

In the last years of his life, Larry lived in Sommières, near Nîmes, the Vidourle slipping beneath a Roman bridge to Aigues-Mortes and the Mediterranean. He would sit in his conservatory upon a stool, his bare legs drawn up beneath him in a lotus position, his own genius loci.

His listeners, if not lost to his enchantment, might wonder if he had seen through illusion or had, in his crises of loneliness and loss, erected an ever more complex arrangement of sliding mirrors. It was a secret he shared with his last companion, Françoise Kestsman, a handsome woman at least as enigmatic as himself, who could smile when Durrell was asked by a young woman guest how he would prefer to die – his reply: 'Of love!'

CHAPTER ONE

Country-Born

PUNJAB, BURMA AND BENGAL, 1912–17

I prefer to present my case in terms of biography, for my thinking is coloured by the fact that I am a colonial, an Anglo-Indian, born into that strange world of which the only great poem is the novel 'Kim' by Kipling.

LAWRENCE DURRELL, FROM *THE ELEPHANT'S BACK*

The fog and biting cold of winter had barely passed when Lawrence George Durrell was born on 27 February 1912 at Jullundur on the Punjab plain, where his father, Lawrence Samuel Durrell, was a railway engineer.

Today Jullundur (or Jalandhar) is something of an outpost, an important military base facing the Pakistan border, sixty miles distant. But when the Raj included all of present-day India as well as Pakistan, Bangladesh and Burma, the city stood astride the main line of the North-Western Railway which ran from Delhi, the imperial capital of British India, 260 miles to the southeast, all the way up to the Khyber Pass, 320 miles to the northwest on India's wild frontier with Afghanistan.

In what was known as the Great Game, a term popularised by Rudyard Kipling's novel *Kim,* the British and Russian empires had long manoeuvred for supremacy in Central Asia, and the principal role of Britain's Indian Army was to combat the threat of invasion from Afghanistan. Jullundur was the headquarters of a brigade in the third

division of the northern army, and the government managed the North-Western Railway because of the strategic importance of the region.

Those who served the railway or the army lived apart from the 'native town', whose inhabitants, largely Muslims, were mostly engaged in sugar-refining and cotton-weaving. The Europeanised part of Jullundur was towards the military cantonment three miles to the south. Here dreary rows of bungalows lined the sprawl of dusty streets round the cantonment railway station. Here also were the American Presbyterian mission school, St Patrick's Roman Catholic Church and the Anglican Church of St Luke where Lawrence George was baptised during the blazing heat of May.

According to a family story, there had been thoughts of calling him Samuel Amos after his paternal grandfather, a retired army major in India, but his mother objected, saying the child could not be given the initials SAD. Instead, at her insistence, he was named Lawrence for his father and given the middle name of George. The choice of George carried a weight of meaning for Louisa. Her father George Dixie had died five years earlier; her mother, still living and called Georgie in the family, had been named Georgina after her father George Nimmo Boustred, a London grocer and cab proprietor. But Georgina never knew her father; he died of tuberculosis at twenty-seven in 1862, leaving his widow Louisa Frost Boustred carrying their unborn daughter while struggling to provide for their other child, also called Louisa, who died two years later at the age of four.

In those days, before the opening of the Suez Canal in 1869, British men in India outnumbered British women by more than four to one, and so Louisa Boustred took her chances with the 'fishing fleet', those women who sailed east looking for husbands, and with Georgina in tow she made the four- to six-month voyage round Africa.* Those who were unsuccessful were known as 'returned empties', but not Louisa who

* The Suez Canal, linking the Mediterranean with the Red Sea, took ten years to build and was opened on 17 November 1869. Exactly when Louisa Boustred and her daughter sailed to India is not known but certainly it was before the opening of the canal. The shorter and quicker route to India was via Egypt, landing at Alexandria, then travelling up the Nile to Cairo and crossing the Eastern Desert to a port on the Red Sea. This was arduous, however, especially the desert crossing, and not the sort of journey to make with a very young child.

in 1869 married James Fairley, a young man who was just embarking on a teaching career at the new engineering college in Roorkee, and with whom she had five more children.[1] (When Louisa Durrell, the granddaughter of Louisa Boustred, had her son baptised Lawrence George she was recalling her family story of deaths and survival.)

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Major Samuel Amos Durrell would nevertheless have taken some satisfaction from the baptism of his first grandson. His mother Mahala, whose married name was Durrell, had been seven years a widow when Samuel was born in 1851, and when he was christened the assistant curate wrote 'illegitimate' next to his name. In the little Suffolk village of Hacheston, its population barely four hundred, this was nothing more than what everybody knew; and they also knew, as Samuel came to know, who his father was. But Samuel spent a lifetime shedding the truth and had now seen the Durrell name passed on without question to yet another generation.

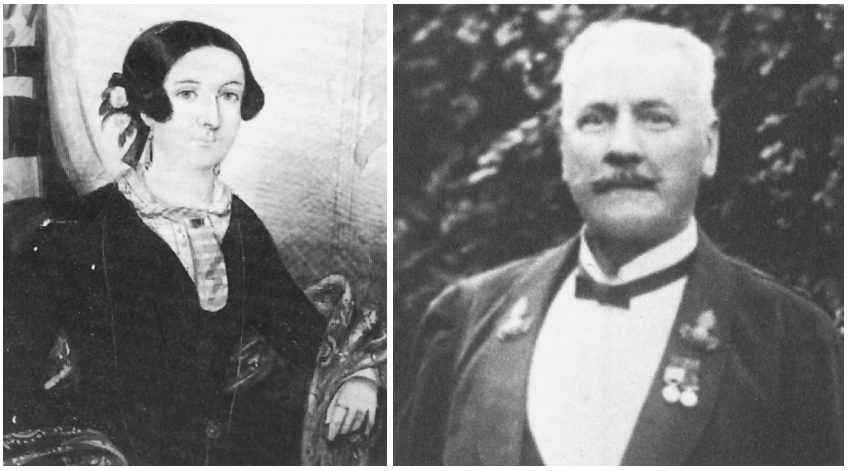
Hacheston lies amid undulating country fifteen miles northeast of Ipswich. In the mid-nineteenth century the village was wholly agricultural. Apart from the vicar at the ancient church of All Saints with its square tower, and one or two artisans or those who went to sea, the men made their living off the land, a few as farmers, most as agricultural labourers. The gravestones and the parish records tell how people born in Hacheston died in Hacheston or in some nearby village no more than an hour's walk away. Among these was Mahala, who was born in Hacheston in 1818, the daughter of a shoemaker, William Tye. Mahala was fifteen when she married William Durrell, a mariner, in 1833. The couple had two children, William Amos, who was born in 1834, and Robert, born in 1836 but who died the following year. The marriage was not successful, in fact it was sufficiently unbearable for Mahala that by 1841 she had left her husband and found protection for herself and her son at Mill Farm in Kettleburgh, three miles west of Hacheston, where sixty-seven-year-old Samuel Stearn employed her as his housekeeper. Three years later, aboard his fishing sloop *Reformation* off Great Yarmouth, William Durrell raised a pistol to his head and blew his brains out.

Mahala became pregnant with her illegitimate child towards the end of 1850 and moved in with her father at Hacheston. When her arrangement with Samuel Stearn ended is not known, and he may well have been dead by now, but at some point she had come to know his nephew, or younger cousin, Samuel Geater Stearn, shown in the 1851 census as a landed proprietor, sixty-three years old, and his two sons, the eldest also called Samuel Geater Stearn, a thirty-nine-year-old corn merchant living in Brandeston, half a mile west of Kettleburgh, and the twenty-seven-year-old John Cooper Stearn, a farmer in nearby Easton. Father and sons were married, the sons just a few years earlier, in 1848. But Mahala Durrell was having an affair with one of them, and when she gave birth to her son in May 1851 she boldly fixed responsibility on her child's father, baptising her boy Samuel Stearn Durrell.

The effect was immediate. Probably thanks to a sum of money placed in the right hands, within six months twenty-five-year-old Henry Page, an agricultural worker, married thirty-two-year-old Mahala, mother of two. Mahala's new home became a haven for her children by three men; William Amos Durrell, her oldest boy, joined the navy but would return to his mother's home when on leave, sharing it with his younger half-brother Samuel and the five children Mahala had by Henry Page.

Age and illness probably rule out Samuel Geater Stearn the elder as the father of Samuel Durrell; he died in 1855 and was buried at All Saints in Easton. His youngest son John Cooper Stearn eventually retired to Fulham in London where he lived with his wife and son. Samuel Geater Stearn's older son and namesake returned to farming in Brandeston; he never had children by his wife Ann, and after her death he handed over the running of the farm to his niece, leaving himself free, as he announced in the 1891 census, to be an 'Artist' and adding 'Sculp' for sculptor.* He died and was buried at Brandeston in 1896, two years after

* Samuel Geater Stearn was an outstanding livestock breeder and would illustrate specimen livestock in oil paints; his one known surviving work is of a Red Poll Cow painted in 1880 when he was still a working farmer. The practical demands of livestock breeders gave rise to animal portraits, which in the nineteenth century became a recognised genre collected at various museums in England and sold at London galleries. Stearn's Red Poll is in the naive tradition, but his interests and his range seem to have developed beyond merely livestock portraits, judging from his declaration in the 1891 census that he was now an artist and a sculptor.



Mahala Page and her son, Samuel (Stearn) Amos Durrell.

the death of Mahala Page, who lies in the graveyard of All Saint's Church, Hacheston. By then their son had been in India twenty years. But his thoughts were still in Suffolk where he paid for his mother's gravestone: at the bottom it bears the inscription, 'Erected by the absent ones', the reference perhaps not only to himself and his family in India but to his half-brother William Amos Durrell.[2]

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Samuel Stearn Durrell obtained a basic education at one of two free schools that had been endowed by charities in Hacheston, and there was also Sunday school. Then from about the age of twelve he became a farm worker within the small circuit of neighbouring villages, Easton, Kettleburgh, Brandeston and Hacheston, whose inhabitants numbered less than two thousand all together. Within this narrow world of fields, church and school he wore the burden of his name and faced a future without horizons. The sea was a possible escape; ports along the Suffolk coast shared in the herring fishery for which Great Yarmouth was famous, and both Mahala's husband William and his father Jesse had been sailors with the fishing fleets, while Mahala's eldest son William Amos Durrell had joined the Royal Navy. But there were the hazards, the loneliness and often the alcoholism of life at sea; there were thoughts of

William's suicide; and there was the tragedy that overtook his half-brother William Amos who sometime in the late 1860s, still in his early thirties, was discharged after suffering a serious injury or illness and returned to Woodbridge, near Hacheston, where he and his wife and four young children struggled to survive on his naval pension. Instead, in 1869, when Samuel was eighteen, he went by train to Ipswich and enlisted for ten years in the Fourth Regiment of Foot, famous for its distinguished record throughout the Crimean War and under Wellington in the Peninsular campaign and at Waterloo. Signing up as 'Samuel Durrell, agricultural labourer', he gave no middle name. In 1872 he transferred to the Royal Artillery and was moved to the coastal defences at Portsmouth where two years later, entering his name in the register as Samuel Amos Durrell, he married Emma Cooper. His older half-brother William Amos had died in 1871; in appropriating William's middle name, Samuel once and for all put Stearn behind him and stepped into the shoes of his mother's legitimate son.

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The man who was now Artillery Sergeant Samuel Amos Durrell was posted to India in 1876. He sailed aboard the HMS *Malabar,* an iron-hulled Euphrates-class troopship, screw-driven and barque-rigged, specially designed to pass through the Suez Canal, and capable of carrying up to 1,200 troops and family to Bombay in six weeks. Emma travelled with him, apparently heavily pregnant, for on 30 March, barely four weeks after they landed, their daughter, Emma Agnes, was christened at Allahabad. In November, Sergeant Durrell was transferred to the Unattached List, those non-commissioned officers recruited from their British regiments to serve in the Indian Army, in his case in the Ordnance Department, charged with keeping army units supplied with arms and ammunition, and in 1881 he was raised to Warrant Officer with the rank of Sub-Conductor, placing him above non-commissioned officers. But the oppressive heat at Allahabad and the unhealthy conditions, reputed to be the worst in India and including cholera, typhoid, dysentery and malaria, took their toll on his family; his daughter did not live long and in September that year Samuel's wife Emma also died. In

a sign of his new officer status, Sub-Conductor Durrell announced his wife's death in the Domestic Occurrences columns of *The Times of India*.

Further Domestic Occurrences followed. On 5 November 1883 at Lucknow, S.A. Durrell, now raised to the rank of Conductor, married D.M. Johnstone. This was Dora Maria, a handsome woman of formidable will, the daughter of a sergeant major in the Royal Horse Artillery, who would bear her husband eight children, the first of whom was likewise announced in *The Times of India*: '23 Sept 1884 at Fatehgarh the wife of Conductor S Durrell Ordnance Dept of a son', this being Lawrence Durrell's father, Lawrence Samuel, the future engineer.

Determined that his son should have the education he never had, Samuel Amos succeeded in getting Lawrence Samuel into Lucknow's prestigious La Martinière College*, which was run along the lines of an English public school and where, owing to the founder's generous endowment, many boys were provided with tuition, board and lodging at a nominal fee. The school, which was famous for the role its boys played in the defence of the Lucknow Residency during the 1857 Mutiny,[3] became a more familiar place for Lawrence Samuel than the ever-shifting residences of his parents, for his father's responsibilities took him from one military station to another across the breadth of northern India, as the records of his children's births and baptisms show: Margaret Dorothy, baptised at Barrackpore in 1885; Eleanor May, baptised at Allahabad in 1887; Elsie Marian, baptised in 1888 at Fort William, headquarters of the British commander-in-chief in India at Calcutta, capital of the Raj until the government moved to Delhi in 1912; William Henry, baptised at Rawalpindi in 1890; Jessie Mahala, baptised at Ferozepore in 1892; Muriel Florence, born at Allahabad in 1894.

Then in 1896 Samuel Amos, now promoted to lieutenant, was back at Rawalpindi in the Punjab, the largest military station in India and the key to the British defence of the North-West Frontier, where in 1897–98 he saw service in the Tirah Campaign to regain control of the Khyber Pass after a tribal uprising along the Afghanistan frontier. In 1901 at the age of fifty he was wounded in action and mentioned in despatches when a combined British and Indian force led the relief of the foreign

* Kipling's character Kimball O'Hara in his novel, *Kim*, attends this school.

legations in Peking during the Boxer Rebellion in China. In the same year he was promoted to captain, then immediately to major, and was posted to Dum Dum, a major weapons manufacturing town near Calcutta and known as the Woolwich of India, where a late child, Enid Nell, completed the family. The following year Major Durrell's eldest son graduated from La Martinière and gained entrance to Thomason College of Civil Engineering at Roorkee where fees were waived for soldiers or those who like himself agreed to spend their third and final year in an industrial apprenticeship.

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Lawrence Durrell's parents, Lawrence Samuel Durrell and Louisa Florence Dixie, first met at Roorkee in the United Provinces, a hundred miles north of Delhi. A modern manufacturing town and military cantonment set on the great Gangetic plain within sight of the Himalayas, Roorkee was a mere mud village until the digging of the Ganges Canal from 1842 to 1854 under the direction of the Bengal Miners and Sappers who established the canal workshops and iron foundry in 1847 and operated the first railway locomotive in India in 1851. The Ganges Canal brought irrigation and agricultural prosperity to the vast area between the Ganges and Jumna rivers from Roorkee down through Delhi and Agra to Allahabad and Benares. In 1847 the Sappers also had a hand in founding and staffing the Thomason College of Civil Engineering, a majestic classical-style building with columned porticoes and a dome, the first engineering college in the British Empire.[4] Thomason College was attended by British youths born in India as well as by native Indians and by Eurasians, people of mixed ancestry who from 1911 were officially termed Anglo-Indians;* its graduates became the builders of India's modern infrastructure, the bridges, roads and dams, the networks of canals and railways of the Raj.

Louisa Dixie's family were linked to the canal, the cantonment and the college. Her grandmother was the wife of Captain James Fairley, who

* Anglo-Indian was applied originally to all the British in India but in 1911 it was officially adopted to describe persons of mixed ancestry, previously known as Eurasians. Nevertheless, and confusingly, Anglo-Indian in its old meaning sometimes continued to be used outside official circles.

Thomason College of Civil Engineering, Roorkee, India.

had recently retired as a teacher at Thomason College, while her father George Dixie was head clerk and works accountant at the Ganges Canal foundry and workshop. Born at Roorkee in 1886, Louisa was raised in The Manor House, the Dixies' spacious home near the college, an oasis of European life in a town that was nine-tenths Hindu and Muslim,[5] and the lively gathering place for the ten children of the extended Fairley-Dixie family. Louisa had a younger brother and sister, Tom and Ella, and two older brothers; William, who was about Lawrence Samuel's age, and John, who was three years more. These and the four Fairley girls and a boy were all linked together by Louisa Boustred and her daughter Georgina.[6]

Barely sixteen when she met Lawrence Samuel, Louisa was a dreamy girl who stood only five feet against the tall eighteen year old engineering student, but she was athletic and had a mischievous sense of fun. Soon he was a regular visitor to The Manor House where he played tennis and joined in entertainments with Louisa and her family. Lawrence Samuel relished this retreat from a college run along military lines and became a favourite among the Dixies.

The Dixies, like the Durrells, were English Protestants, but they had been in India a full generation longer, since at least 1845 when Louisa's

grandfather John Dixie, a sergeant major in the Sappers and Miners, married a young widow called Johanna Doherty, born O'Brien, in Delhi. 'I'm Irish mother English father. God-fearing, lusty, chapel-going Mutiny stock', Lawrence Durrell would write from Corfu in the 1930s to his friend Henry Miller.[7] But though Durrell liked to say that his mother was Irish and that he was Irish too, his one tenuous connection with Ireland was his maternal great-grandmother Johanna whose ancestry, in fact, was highly questionable. The Dixies never claimed to be an Irish family, Dixie is not an Irish name, and there is no evidence that any of the Dixies ever lived in Ireland or were posted there on military service.[8] As Durrell admitted later in life, 'I'm just a stage Irishman'.[9]

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For all that the Dixies found a home amid the college, canal and cantonment at Roorkee, they occupied an uncertain position in India. Britain never intended India for British settlement; instead British soldiers and administrators were posted to India, and though their families might maintain a presence there, with one generation after another taking up appointments in the country, there was no formal emigration. These servants of the Raj returned to Britain on periodic furloughs, for schooling and university, and ultimately they would retire there; home was always Britain.

But Louisa saw things differently. 'Most people talked of home and meant England; when we said home we meant India', Louisa said.[10] Her maternal grandmother Louisa Boustred had come to India as an escape from desperate circumstances, bringing her surviving daughter who was only a small child, while Louisa's father and his mother had both been born in India and knew no other home. The Dixies had become what was known as 'country-born',* the descendants of those who had come to India

* Strictly, 'country-born' was not simply a matter of being born in India; even the children of the viceroy might be born in India. What ultimately mattered was where one was educated – in Britain or in India? If one was educated in Britain then one was no longer country-born for one returned to India as British; if one was educated in India then one was country-bred. But generally country-born meant country-bred, and both terms carried derogatory overtones.

and remained in the country and raised families there. But theirs was a very small world. Among India's population of 300 million, only 154,000 were British; nearly a hundred thousand of these either served in the armed forces or the civil service or were family members of those who did. About 107,000 were British subjects born in Britain or elsewhere in Europe or in North America or Australia. But only 47,000 were British born in India – the country-born who called India home, a home they shared with those who were neither British nor Indian, the 87,000 Eurasians.[11]

Louisa spoke with an emotional bravado when she claimed India, not England, as the Dixies' home, for she understood that the country-born occupied an inferior position among the British in India. Usually the descendants of rank and file soldiers who stayed on in India, they tended to form a 'poor white' underclass, often mixing with Eurasians and filling intermediary employment positions between the British posted from India and the native Indians. Even those who prospered were despised. 'The parents, who are English', remarked the principal of La Martinière College's Calcutta branch, 'belong to a lower social grade. Such parents may be engaged in trade or commerce ... or they may be employees of the various railway or steamer companies, or they may belong to the lower ranks of Government service'.[12] Despite sending their children to the best available schools in India, the parents were consigning them to second-rate futures, for the highest posts in India went to those who kept up their British identity by being educated in Britain and returning there from time to time. The cost of getting the hallmark, as being sent to Britain to be educated was called, was considerable, both the financial cost and also the emotional cost of separation. But educating one's children in India also had its cost; parents were jeopardising their childrens' careers and social status by marking them with the label of 'country-born'.

The British emphasis on hierarchy during the Raj was influenced by the Hindu caste system, according to Ian Stephens, editor of *The Statesman* in Calcutta, whose maternal ancestors had been in India since 1828. The people at the top were those British who occupied the highest ranks of the Indian Civil Service; popularly known as the 'heaven-born', they corresponded, said Stephens, to the exalted Brahmin priestly caste who indeed claimed to be heaven-born. Then came the senior officers of the British military, corresponding to the Kshatriyas, the Hindu

warrior caste. The ICS and the military looked down with contempt on box-wallahs, as they called British businessmen, who were comparable to the Vaisyas, the wealthy but nevertheless low-caste Hindu merchants and moneylenders. Pursuing the parallel to the Shudra caste, comprising servants and peasants, Stephens compared them to 'the menials, the so-called Eurasians or Anglo-Indians, people of mixed blood analogous to the despised Hindu lower castes. Another category here was the unfortunate domiciled community, people of pure British race whose parents, for one reason or another, had elected to settle in India.'[13]

Louisa knew all about hierarchy and the fear that the country-born, even if 'pure British', might lose their identity altogether by being absorbed into the class of Eurasians. 'In my day', said Louisa, 'it was the Eurasians that they felt most strongly about. We wouldn't be allowed even to play with them by my grandmother. Of course we always did.'[14] Louisa's grandmother Johanna had good reason to be sensitive about mixing with Eurasians as her own background was obscure. When she married John Dixie in 1845 she gave her widow's name as Doherty, her father's name as Edward O'Brien, and gave her date of birth as 1817. But where she was born is unknown. The British government only took direct control of India after the Mutiny in 1857; until then India was governed by the East India Company, which did not encourage European women to come to India, and in fact until 1833 would not permit them to sail on its ships without special permission and possession of a substantial sum of money.[15] Instead it was commonplace for European men in India to marry local women or take them on as mistresses – women who were fully Indian or those already the product of mixed relationships. Johanna was therefore likely to have had some Indian blood in her veins – and whether she had or not, the suspicion would have been that she was 'passing' as a European.

Being a child of the college and the canal provided Louisa with a sense of assured place, but Lawrence Samuel was learning all about hierarchy too, right here at Roorkee where he was being treated as second-rate. Though Thomason had been the first civil engineering college in the empire, its position had been increasingly challenged by the Royal Indian Engineering College, which opened in 1871 at Cooper's Hill outside London. Already in 1882 admission to Thomason had been restricted to 'Pure Natives of

India' and 'Statutory Natives of India', a category comprising Eurasians and domiciled Europeans, the 'country-born'. This was followed in 1882 and 1883 by the Roorkee Resolutions by which the government gave preferential employment opportunities in the Public Works Department to native Indians at the expense of Eurasians and domiciled Europeans. British-born students, or those sent 'home' to get the hallmark, attended Cooper's Hill, where after 1892 they graduated with the commanding title of 'Imperial Engineers' and were recruited to the higher echelons of the Public Works Department in India, while Roorkee students, designated 'Provincial Engineers', were employed in positions subordinate to the Cooper's Hill graduates, with fewer promotion opportunities and less pay. Lawrence Samuel's father, Major Durrell, had achieved much through the army, but he had not come to India to stay, and after he retired he would set an example to his children and return to England to end his days. Lawrence Samuel carried within him his father's feeling for 'home' as well as his ambitions, and he would spend the rest of his life striving to overcome the disadvantage of being country-born.

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After leaving Thomason College in July 1904, Lawrence Samuel served his apprenticeship with the Indian State Railways Service, then went to work for the North-Western Railway in the Punjab as an Assistant Engineer, supervising the construction of a 'fine bridge, of which it was necessary to sink the foundations to an extraordinary depth',[16] across the Sutlej, the greatest of the Punjab's five rivers (*punj*, five; *ab*, waters), near Phillaur. The same extremes of rains and droughts that made much of the Punjab uninhabitable, until the network of canals built by the British in the nineteenth century turned the Punjab into the breadbasket of India, also accounted for the difficulty in spanning the Sutlej, a bone-dry bed in the hot season from April to the end of June, but during the following rains a raging torrent. Lawrence Samuel's success in sinking massive piers to bedrock as much as 140 feet deep marked him as a young man of uncommon ability, and in 1909, still only twenty-five, the railway promoted him to District Engineer at Karnal with responsibility for almost every construction project in the area.

There, Lawrence Samuel met Major Cecil Henry Buck, Deputy Commissioner of the Karnal District,[17] who conceived the idea of raising funds for what he intended as 'the finest district hospital in the Punjab' at Karnal, which on its completion was named for the late King Edward VII. Buck sketched the initial designs, and then, as he wrote in his autobiography, had the 'plans completed by L.S. Durrell, my brother-in-law'.[18] Buck and Durrell were not yet brothers-in-law in 1909, but it was while they were cooperating on building the hospital that Buck began his romance with Lawrence Samuel's younger sister Eleanor May – simply May, as Buck always called her. Buck had recently been abandoned by his wife who ran off with the Austro-Hungarian consul at Calcutta, taking her daughter with her.[19] But within weeks of Lawrence Samuel's arrival at Karnal, Buck was writing in his diary, 'To tea with Mr & Miss Durrell & for a motor drive after'.[20] Eleanor May, who was twenty-three, and the thirty-nine-year -old Cecil Henry Buck were married a year later, following Major Samuel Durrell's proud announcement of their engagement in *The Pioneer* newspaper on 5 May 1910,[21] sealing a lifelong friendship between Buck and Lawrence Samuel whose sister was now among the heaven-born. He was greatly amused when Eleanor May told him how shortly after the marriage she and Buck went on an official tour of the district and at one place passed under a magnificent arch of welcome on which was inscribed in huge gold letters, 'Long Live Major Buck. God Help Lady Buck'.[22]

In the midst of these enterprises and with growing confidence in his career, in 1910 Lawrence Samuel returned to Roorkee long enough to marry Louisa Dixie before taking her to Jullundur where again he was the railway's District Engineer and where in 1912 his son Lawrence George Durrell was born. But Jullundur, thought Louisa, was a horrible place, and she had no regrets when her husband won a challenging new job in Burma.

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In November 1912, Lawrence Samuel Durrell was appointed Engineer-in-Chief of Construction for the Buthidaung-Maungdaw Light Railway, a thousand miles east from Jullundur and across the Bay of Bengal in Arakan, the narrow coastal strip of Burma running four hundred miles southwards from Chittagong in present-day Bangladesh. The Durrells

The wedding of Lawrence Samuel Durrell and Louisa Dixie in Roorkee, United Provinces, India, 1910.

sailed from Calcutta on the British India Steam Navigation Company's weekly service to Rangoon known as 'the jungle run', which called at the Arakan port of Akyab, a town of thirty-five thousand people in those days, where they boarded a sidepaddle steamer of the Arakan Flotilla Company for the day-long journey to the northern town of Buthidaung at the head of the Mayu River. With no roads or railways in Arakan, journeys into the interior followed roundabout river routes, and everything seemed remote.

The five-month rainy season had just ended as their sidepaddler churned its way up the river, which meandered through a network of tidal channels, creeks and islands bounded by alluvial plains. The flatness of the landscape was broken only by bent figures in the paddy fields and by riverside villages, their houses made of woven reeds and built among stands of trees for shade. As the shadows lengthened the steamer arrived

at Buthidaung, a place of three to four thousand inhabitants with a few wood and reed houses ranged along the river, its main street a winding dirt path wandering off between flimsy reed huts into the nearby fields. At evening a mist rose off the river and shrouded everything in a dense fog. Then in the morning, as the sun rose and the day grew warmer, the mist dissolved and the world emerged again, like a shimmering water-colour. Here the Durrell family came to live while Lawrence Samuel built the railway through the mountains to Maungdaw.

Arakan had been an independent kingdom since at least the first century CE, and rice production had long been the mainstay of its economy, but the Buddhist Arakanese preferred to do little work themselves and relied on slaving raids into the Muslim areas of Bengal to the north, setting their captives to work in ploughing the fields, and sowing, transplanting and harvesting the crop. The feckless Arakanese made a tempting target for Burmese military expansion, and in 1784 Burma invaded the kingdom, reduced it to a province, and closed it off from the outside world. During four decades of ruthless oppression, the Burmese, who were themselves Buddhists, killed tens of thousands of Arakanese and deported a considerable proportion of the population to the centre of Burma. Many others escaped; in 1799 alone, thirty-five thousand Arakanese fled to Chittagong District in British India to seek protection.

But in 1824, when renewed Burmese expansion threatened the borders of India, the British went to war and two years later annexed Arakan under the terms of the Treaty of Yandaboo. Finding the country scarcely populated and its once high-yield paddy fields choked with wild growth, the British encouraged rice production by opening the port of Akyab to trade and developing international markets and encouraging the flow of outside labour, so that by the late nineteenth century Arakan had become one of the major rice exporting regions in the world. In place of slave labour, which the British immediately abolished, Bengali Muslims came as seasonal agricultural workers, attracted by good wages. This was the origin of the Rohingya people.[23]

From Chittagong, the Bengali workers travelled by boat or on foot to Maungdaw, a small port on the east bank of the Naaf estuary where it opens into the Bay of Bengal, then traversed the steep Mayu range by a rough mountain track to Buthidaung on the Mayu River where launches

distributed them to the rice fields of the interior. In fact Buthidaung was only twelve miles as the crow flies from Maungdaw, and Lawrence Samuel's job was to facilitate the flow of labour by driving a railway line between the two. The engineering difficulties were formidable; there were bridges to be built, gradients to be cut, and tunnels to be constructed through the highest portions of the mountain range. Nor could there be any let-up during the monsoon season, when 200 inches of rain fell from June to October.

For Lawrence Samuel's construction work, neither the slightly built Arakanese nor Bengalis would do. Still only twenty-eight years old, he mastered a labour force of Pathans, a rugged people who came from the strongest and most warlike tribes of the mountainous border regions of Afghanistan and the North-West Frontier Province of British India. Clearing their way through the jungle of dense bamboo breaks, tall trees and knotted creeper, and assailed by mosquitoes, flies and leeches, his men carved miles of gradients out of the mountain flanks and cut two tunnels through the hard metamorphic rock. In the midst of these Herculean labours, Lawrence Samuel improved on graduating from Thomason College as a Provincial Engineer by completing a correspondence course in engineering with the University of London and in 1913 was accepted as an Associate Member of Britain's Institution of Civil Engineers.

Then on 4 August 1914 Britain declared war on Germany, which had invaded neutral Belgium. Major Samuel Durrell had retired to England with his wife Dora, so the couple were alone now; their young daughter Enid Nell had died in India of diphtheria in 1912, the year Lawrence Durrell was born. At the declaration of war, Major Durrell, sixty-three, volunteered for active service but died at Portsmouth just ten days later.[24] We do not know if Louisa's son, the future writer, knew the secrets at the heart of the family story, nor if his father Lawrence Samuel knew the secrets either. But the secret had been lived by Samuel Amos Durrell, the striving son of bold Mahala, and a story left untold has a power that can reach down the generations.

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At Buthidaung from 1912 to 1915 the Durrells lived in a house provided by the Arakan Flotilla Company, the promoters of the railway.

The population of the area was very mixed. Many of the Bengalis who migrated down the coast from Chittagong to work in the rice paddies of Arakan decided to stay, settling mostly in the northern border region, so that in Buthidaung and also Maungdaw the immigrant Muslim population, when added to the descendants of Muslim slaves, outnumbered the Buddhist Arakanese by two to one, and mosques were more common than pagodas. But the Buddhists were more suited to domestic tasks, and Lawrence Durrell was placed in the care of a young woman who dressed in the traditional lungyi, a silk wrap-around garment.* A photograph of Durrell with his ayah, taken when he was about two, shows him staring confidently at the camera, a slight play of a smile on his lips. He is certainly a robust boy, as he would have to be to survive the perils of disease and the extremes of climate in Arakan. That said, domestic life for the Durrells at Buthidaung was entirely genteel; there was no question of trailing round the country after Lawrence Samuel and having to rough it in the wilds.

Durrell was nine months old when his parents came to Buthidaung, and they remained until he was a boy of three, old enough to carry away with him his earliest memories. He would later say that his mother had been happiest there. Otherwise what he seems to have remembered were the rains. In his first novel, *Pied Piper of Lovers*, completed in 1934 when he was twenty-two, Durrell begins with the rains in Arakan: 'The child was born in those first days of the monsoon, when the ground was rapidly becoming a living clot of humidity, and the ravines mere waterways for the passage of such debris as the wind had torn from the hillsides: when the clouds moved in menacing night-patrol above a cowed earth. At the approach of that season the forests began to huddle together and grip the disintegrating earth more firmly with their roots.'

* Larry is looked after for at least two years by a Buddhist ayah before he is four years old. This place is where he believed his mother was happiest. It had profound implications for his life and work. Larry said later: 'If you live in a Buddhist country, it is so extraordinary. You wake up without being afraid of your neighbour, as you do in the countries we inhabit. The whole of nature seems permeated by a sense of harmless good will, and it opens a field for self-development which is not accessible in a country where you have very rigid, theologically oriented people with a national ethos that's repressive or restrictive in any way.' He talks about this in his little-known book, *A Key to Modern British Poetry* (Oklahoma Press, 1952). In a later interview with Claudine Brellet, Larry asserted, 'If I had to choose a religion Buddhism would satisfy me more than the others.'

A confident stare: Larry with his ayah in Burma.

The child born into this liquid Götterdämmerung is Walsh Clifton, whose father is a railway engineer in what is a loosely autobiographical novel. But as though fiction and reality were the same, Durrell would claim in later years that he himself had been born not at Jullundur but 'in the wilds of Burma'.[25]

By May 1915, two and a half years after arriving in Arakan and before the monsoon rains began again, Lawrence Samuel had completed the construction of the Buthidaung–Maungdaw railway. A measure of his achievement is that his railway through the mountains, converted in

1924 to a motor road, was of such strategic importance that it formed the front line between the Japanese and the British in Burma during the Second World War, and it remains the sole overland route between Bangladesh and Burma to this day.

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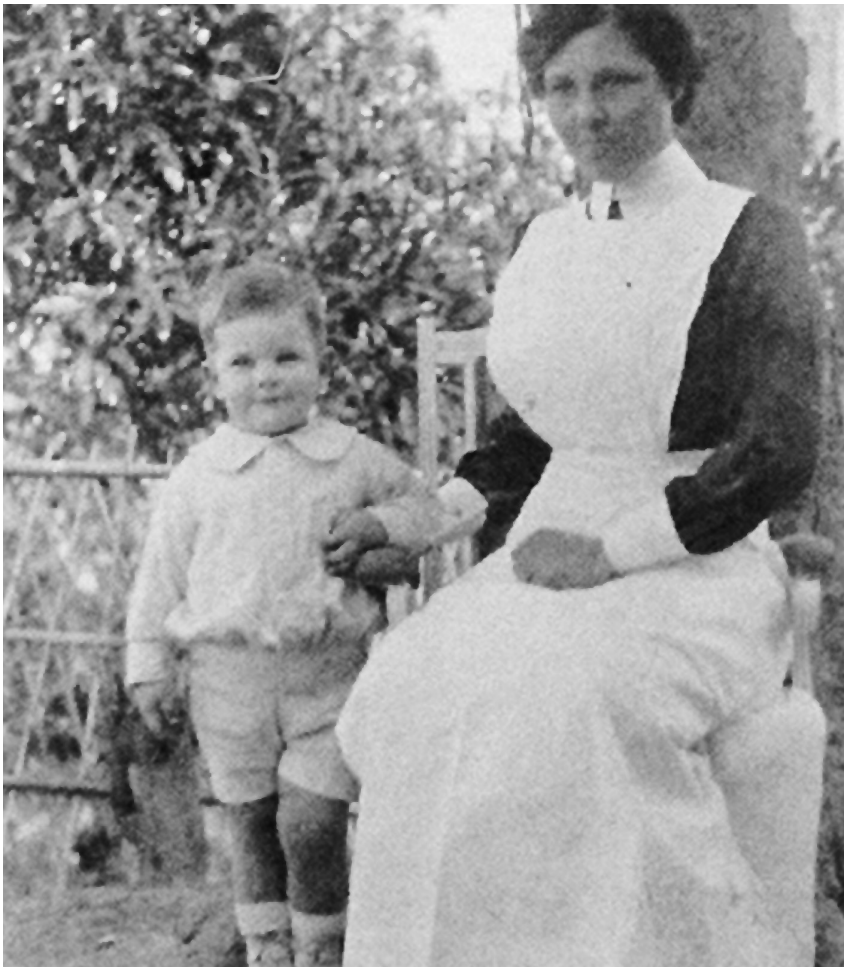
Louisa Durrell was eight months pregnant with her second child when Lawrence Samuel settled his family and a governess for his son into their new home at Mymensingh in East Bengal (now Bangladesh), seventy-six miles by rail north of Dacca, where in November 1915 he took up the position of Executive Engineer with the Mymensingh-Bhairab Bazar Railway Company. Mymensingh town, known also as Nasirabad, was the administrative headquarters of Mymensingh District, which was one of the most populous districts in British India owing to a recent influx of Muslims who made up three-quarters of its more than four million population. But no paved road went to Mymensingh town, a backwater[26] of twenty thousand Bengali-speaking Muslims and Hindus situated on the west bank of a silted-up and barely navigable channel of the Brahmaputra, and electricity and motor vehicles were unknown throughout the district.

European society amounted to a handful of British civil servants, and below these in the pecking order the commercial people or box-wallahs, and those working on the railway, while at the apex of the Mymensingh molehill sat the District Magistrate who apart from his legal duties was the chief representative of the Raj. There was also a British Medical Officer, known as the Civil Surgeon, who despite the sodden atmosphere of Mymensingh, where daytime temperatures commonly rose to 94° Fahrenheit and the heavy rains, though less than half that in Arakan, lay about in fetid pools, could justly assert that Mymensingh had the reputation of being 'one of the healthiest districts in the plains of India'. As at Buthidaung, the Durrells lived comfortably at Mymensingh; a photograph taken at this time shows a plump and immaculately dressed Larry in the company of his governess who wears a white starched apron with white starched cuffs and holds him firmly by the hand. 'Her white starched cuffs smelt of camphor, and her breath of cinnamon', Larry would write in *Pied Piper of Lovers*.[27]



'White-starched cuffs': Larry with his governess at Mymensingh.

His new position was a rewarding one for Lawrence Samuel, who could hardly have done better than to have F.R. Bagley, the railway's Chief Engineer, as his immediate superior. There was no such thing as an impossible railway for Bagley, whose dream was to provide continuous rail communication from the Afghan frontier through India and Burma and into China. In 1890 he had reported on the feasibility of one of the most difficult links in this grand scheme, a railway from Mandalay in Burma to Kunlon on the Chinese border. In 1892 he was appointed Chief Engineer of the project, a task that he completed as far as Lashio

by 1903 when it ran into political complications. The Mandalay–Lashio line rose in spectacular rising zigzags along the precipitous flanks of the Shan Hills, and involved a complete spiral curve and four reversing stations with a gradient of 1 in 25 over much of the distance, which except for rack-and-pinion railways was exceeded at that time only by the Darjeeling Himalayan Railway. To his vision of knitting the whole of Asia together with railways, Bagley also had a vision of a great spiritual coming together between East and West that he expressed through his membership of the Order of the Star of the East, an adjunct of the Theosophical Society*, which spread ideas about Eastern religion in the West and promoted universal brotherhood and taught that all religions are versions of one esoteric truth realised by the individual's direct apprehension of the divine.[28]

Bagley's new project was to build a metre-gauge 236-mile line that would connect the Eastern Bengal Railway, which ran between Dacca and Mymensingh, with the Assam-Bengal Railway at Bhairab Bazar, and in Lawrence Samuel Durrell he found a young man with the energy and expertise to get the job done. Between Mymensingh and Bhairab Bazar lay a vast and steaming alluvium patterned into fields of jute and rice, and intersected by numerous small rivers and irrigation canals. But this fertile and thickly inhabited region depended on poor roads trafficked by pack ponies and carts or on the old channel of the Brahmaputra River, which was navigable only during the rainy season to get its produce to Calcutta and other major ports and markets, and it was expected that the new line would contribute immensely to the development of the district. Within months of Lawrence Samuel's arrival the Mymensingh-Bhairab Bazar Railway Company placed an order with the Cleveland Bridge and Engineering Company of Darlington for 127 lattice-type girder bridge sections,[29] and for the next two years he would be constructing embankments and causeways to extend the line from Mymensingh to Gouripur and sinking foundations and raising spans for a bridge across the Brah-

* The Theosophical Society these days is a throwaway line, as most people have never heard of it. To people of Miller and Durrell's time it was a major philosophical and spiritual system of belief. The connection between India and the theosophists in England and America was something any educated person would have known about. The same is true for Gurdjieff, Gnosticism or Rosicrucianism.

maputra. But first, on 12 November 1915, Louisa delighted her husband by giving birth to a daughter whom they named Margery Ruth.

The following February, as Larry was turning four, his sister was baptised at the little Anglican church of St George half-hidden in a garden of eucalyptus and palms. A few weeks later she became ill, a mild sore throat and fever at first, but within days she was gripped by the full toxic force of diphtheria, her pulse racing, the fever rising, her neck swelling until she could no longer swallow and could barely breathe. In those days before antibiotics the Medical Officer could do nothing, and in two days more, cradled in her mother's arms at home, she suffocated to death. Burial took place at the town cemetery that same afternoon, but perhaps first, as happened among the British in India, the child was placed in a small coffin on a table in the house where her young brother with his mother and father, their governess and their friends said a final prayer.

No account exists of how Louisa or Lawrence Samuel reacted to the death of their daughter. Nor did Larry ever refer to it directly. Yet within this silence the death of Margery Ruth had a profound effect on Louisa, Lawrence Samuel and most of all on Larry himself. The shock of his sister's death was a threat to Larry's world, to the order of things; despite his normally ebullient nature he would always feel the vulnerability of his own existence and the ease by which the world around him could be undermined. Also, as children often do, he may have felt responsible. He survived her, but the brief four months of his sister's life had awakened in him feelings of love, rivalry and wonder, and at her death a part of him threatened to pass with her.

It may have been now, while Lawrence Samuel's work on the railway took him away from Mymensingh for days and even weeks at a time, that Louisa took to the habit of drinking too much gin. She never entirely accepted her daughter's death, and imagining that she could hear a lonely spirit crying out at night among the trees behind the house, Louisa would take a lantern and walk into the darkness, crying out 'Come on, come on', searching for her child. Suddenly Larry felt very much alone.

That is the impression given by Larry's first novel, *Pied Piper of Lovers*, its pages filled with death and a sense of helplessness and oppression, a loss of trust and faith. 'Why do people die?', asks Walsh Clifton, Larry's alter ego, the young boy growing up in India. He is a strong and healthy

child, yet he is aware that people not unlike himself become ill and die. 'He would hate to lie under the ground in a closed box. … His father could not save him. … There would be long slender candles about the room. … He wanted to cry at the thought of it, but the tears would not come. He knew that his father would be sorry and much too shy to come and see him as he lay there in the loneliness of death.'[30] The estrangement between father and son is notable, but the relationship between mother and son is not addressed at all; Larry has Walsh's mother die in childbirth in the first few pages of the book, as, perhaps, Louisa, sunk in mourning and depression, became a 'dead mother' for him. In psychiatry the concept of the 'dead mother' describes a process by which a child experiences the image of a living and loving mother as transformed into a distant figure, a dead parent. In reality the mother remains alive but she has suffered some traumatic event, often the death of another child, causing her to withdraw her emotional investment in the surviving child for whom she psychically dies. As the child has no understanding of what has taken place he experiences not only a loss of love but also a loss of meaning. The child attempts to counter his feelings of depression, loss and meaninglessness by creating and animating his own fantasmatic version of his mother and of the world around him. As a defence against the fear of collapse, the child and the adult he becomes stresses the erotic in an attempt to reconnect in the face of the anguish of the void he experiences.[31]

In *Pied Piper of Lovers* the death note sounds again when Walsh is sent to school in England where he meets a girl – a girl he falls in love with but who dies; a girl whose name is Ruth.

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A year after she had buried her daughter and a few days after her first-born had turned five, Louisa gave birth to another son. Leslie Durrell was born on 10 March 1917 during an outbreak of cholera at Mymensingh. 'I can dodge even God', Larry reassured his mother,[32] but Leslie resorted to dodges of another kind. Delicate in infancy, Leslie would prove an often sickly boy, though one who learnt to feign illness to win the attention of his anxious mother, who never failed to indulge him.

The Brahmaputra bridge was due to open for traffic in November and Lawrence Samuel's work at Mymensingh was drawing to an end. In April, a month after his second son was born, he applied for a commission in the Royal Engineers. One and a half million Indians volunteered for military service during the First World War, and a hundred and forty thousand had already been sent to the Western Front,[33] where it was Lawrence Samuel's intention to take charge of an Indian Labour Corps. In a sign of his rising reputation his application was supported not only by Cecil Buck but also by T.R.J. Ward, the newly-appointed Inspector General of Irrigation for the whole of India. Early in his career Ward had been Executive Engineer of the Punjab Irrigation Branch, where he was involved in the construction of the Chenab and Jumna canals, part of the broader irrigation system which included the Ganges Canal that ran through Roorkee in the United Provinces, and in 1912 he was the engineering officer for the selection of Delhi as the site for the new capital of India. A long-time colleague of Buck, Ward would become a founding member and first president of the Institute of Engineers (India) in 1920 and be knighted that same year. But despite the endorsements by Buck and Ward, Lawrence Samuel's application was turned down. The harsh climate and the horror of the trenches, which was unlike anything Indians had experienced in colonial engagements, and perhaps most of all the decimation of their Hindustani-speaking British officers who were then replaced by officers unable to speak their language, had led to a loss of morale, and by 1916 all Indian units, apart from two cavalry divisions, had been transferred from France and Belgium to the Middle East. Lawrence Samuel's offer had been overtaken by events, but his disappointment was also deeply personal; returning from the front as a commissioned officer in the British army would have given him something like the hallmark. Instead he spent another year at Mymensingh where he undertook a survey of the route from Gouripur to Bhairab Bazar.

CHAPTER TWO

The Hills

KURSEONG, 1918–22

Once in idleness was my beginning ...
immortal to my seventh year

LAWRENCE DURRELL, 'CITIES, PLAINS AND PEOPLE'[1]

By November 1918, as the First World War was coming to an end, Lawrence Samuel had installed his family at Kurseong, 'the place of the white orchid', a northern outpost of British India in the foothills of the Himalayas between Nepal, Sikkim and Bhutan. His work at Mymensingh under F.R. Bagley, who had engineered the Mandalay–Lashio mountain railway in Burma, recommended Lawrence Samuel for the post of Executive Engineer of the Darjeeling Himalayan Railway where his job was to survey and maintain one of the most remarkable railways in the world.* Opened in 1881, the railway for the most part followed the Cart Road built by the British twenty years earlier on which pack ponies, bullock carts, palkee gharries and pony tongas† took three days

* UNESCO World Heritage Site status was given to three mountain railways in India in 1999, the Darjeeling Himalayan Railway, the Nilgiri Mountain Railway and the Kalka Shimla Railway. UNESCO states: 'The Darjeeling Himalayan Railway was the first, and is still the most outstanding, example of a hill passenger railway. Opened in 1881, its design applies bold and ingenious engineering solutions to the problem of establishing an effective rail link across a mountainous terrain of great beauty'.

† A palkee gharry is a litter borne by porters who place the carrying poles on their shoulders. A pony tonga is a light two-wheeled carriage.