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## Rounsevelle Wildman: The Lone Ethnographer

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From 1893 to 1897, Rounsevelle Wildman (1864-1901), the United States Consul at Singapore, published a series of articles in several American magazines. These eyewitness accounts and short stories were published mostly in the *Overland Monthly and Out West Magazine*, but also in *The Youth's Companion* and *St Nicholas: An Illustrated Magazine for Young Folks*. Wildman's narratives and descriptions of the Malay Archipelago's peoples reveal an ethnographic perspective that may be analyzed using Renato Rosaldo's Lone Ethnographer concept. In *Culture & Truth: The Remaking of Social Analysis*, Rosaldo presents this concept as a tripartite one, consisting of the ethnographic process, the role of ethnography in imperialism, and the relationship between the ethnographer and natives. While Wildman was not an academic anthropologist, the model illuminates his ethnographic perspective as an American diplomat in a European colony. His articles reflect how ethnography could be used to support imperialism and the subjugation of native peoples. They also demonstrate an informal ethnographic process.

What most defines Wildman as a Lone Ethnographer is his portrayal of the Malayan native as a natural subject of colonialism and its consequent "civilization." According to Rosaldo, the Lone Ethnographer's writings "represented the human objects of the civilizing

mission's global enterprise as if they were ideal recipients of the white man's burden."<sup>1</sup> Indeed, Wildman first established the colonized native as "members of a harmonious, internally homogenous unchanging culture."<sup>2</sup> This characterization of the Malayan native is most strongly manifested in his description of Malay children. To them, he attributed an Old World timelessness, where child-life has always been "measured by a few short years in Malaya,"<sup>3</sup> a childhood cut off by a marriage to a spouse that one has never met – it was "not proper that a Malay should see his intended before marriage."<sup>4</sup> To a commentary of such unchanging social customs, he added a vivid description of the New World timelessness of Malay children. In the "fashion of Baboo's race," the child was perfumed with sandalwood and Arab scents which reminded Wildman of "the holds of the old sailing-ships that used to come into Boston harbor from the Indies."<sup>5</sup> By alluding to a Malay culture suspended in time, Wildman contributes to the Lone Ethnographer's view that native society "'need[ed]' progress, or economic and moral uplifting."<sup>6</sup>

Wildman's depiction of the Malayan natives evinces the role of ethnography in imperialism in other ways. In the manner of the Lone Ethnographer, Wildman's portrayal of the "'timeless traditional culture' served as a self-congratulatory reference point against which Western civilization could measure its own progressive historical evolution."<sup>7</sup> He applauded the efforts of British colonizers who bring native societies up to Western standards. Most

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<sup>1</sup> Renato Rosaldo, *Culture & Truth: The Remaking of Social Analysis* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1993), 30.

<sup>2</sup> Rosaldo, *Culture & Truth*, 31.

<sup>3</sup> Rounsevelle Wildman, "Amok!: A Malayan Story," *Overland Monthly and Out West Magazine* 23, no. 138 (June 1894): 590.

<sup>4</sup> Rounsevelle Wildman, "Malayan Child-Life: Little Busuk," *The Youth's Companion*, no. 3570 (October 1895): 500.

<sup>5</sup> Rounsevelle Wildman, "Baboo's Good Tiger: A Malayan Tale," *Overland Monthly and Out West Magazine* 27, no. 162 (June 1896): 629.

<sup>6</sup> Rosaldo, *Culture & Truth*, 31.

<sup>7</sup> Rosaldo, *Culture & Truth*, 31.

dramatically, Wildman enthused about the “White Rajah of Borneo” Sir James Brooke (1803 – 1868):

“[Brooke] carved out a principality larger than the State of New York out of an unknown island, reduced its savage population to orderly tax-paying citizens, cleared the Borneo and Java seas of their thousands of pirate praus, and in their place built up a merchant fleet and a commerce of nearly five millions of dollars a year.”<sup>8</sup>

Wildman compared Brooke’s other achievements to American efforts to civilize the “barbarians” at home: just as the Dyak natives found themselves penalized by Brooke’s government for head-hunting, so too did the American Indians long to go hunting for scalps.<sup>9</sup> To a lesser extent, Wildman’s accounts of his experiences in Singapore also affirm the place of the white Westerner at the pinnacle of the evolutionary hierarchy. He described how in Singapore, there were only “two hundred of us white people to represent law and civilization amid the teeming native population.”<sup>10</sup> These natives were unable to comprehend the outside world – one Malay *pungholo* (headman), Wahpering, could not fathom the size of the United States for he was under the impression that Holland and the Dutch colonies occupied most of the world map.<sup>11</sup> Neither had these natives adopted civilized attitudes toward their women – Wildman was shocked when Wahpering gestured towards Wildman’s wife to ask how much the consul had paid for her.<sup>12</sup> Thus, Wildman’s writings conform to the Lone Ethnographer model by establishing the Westerner and the colonized native at their respective ends of the evolutionary process.

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<sup>8</sup> Rounsevelle Wildman, "The White Rajah of Borneo: The Founding of Sarawak," *Overland Monthly and Out West Magazine* 29, no. 171 (March 1897): 242-3.

<sup>9</sup> Rounsevelle Wildman, "The Rajah of Sarawak," *St Nicholas: An Illustrated Magazine for Young Folks* 20, no. 12 (October 1893): 910.

<sup>10</sup> Rounsevelle Wildman, "A New Year's Day in Malaya: Picturesque Singapore Customs," *Overland Monthly and Out West Magazine* 27, no. 157 (January 1896): 79.

<sup>11</sup> Rounsevelle Wildman, "How We Played Robinson Crusoe: In the Straits of Malacca," *Overland Monthly and Out West Magazine* 28, no. 163 (July 1896): 39.

<sup>12</sup> Wildman, "How We Played Robinson Crusoe: In the Straits of Malacca," 40.

That being said, Wildman's demonstration of the role of ethnography in imperialism is not confined to the academic framework of the Lone Ethnographer. Wildman's articles are representative of a broader Western belief in Eurocentric diffusionism. As Europe (or European-based societies) advances inexorably toward modernity, the rest of the world remains as "traditional society," advancing sluggishly or stagnating.<sup>13</sup> To modernize colonial peoples, colonizers (like Sir James Brooke) had to introduce a modern economy, public administration, and technical infrastructure.<sup>14</sup> The introduction of modernity in this manner served to replicate the European pattern of development, which was seen as the natural course of human progress.<sup>15</sup> So too are Wildman's articles representative of the related late nineteenth-century concept of social evolutionism. Evolutionists thought that "the range of human existence [was] represented by a naturally unfolding, linear progression of developmental stages along which white peoples [White Europeans and Americans] had quite obviously traveled the farthest."<sup>16</sup> Immersed in an intellectual and social environment where diffusionism and evolutionism gained currency, Wildman unsurprisingly wrote like an ethnographer even if he was not one formally.

As an aside, it is interesting to note that Wildman complicated this hierarchy of peoples by differentiating the classes of white people. He described an encounter with a fellow American who sought refuge from the rain in his holiday bungalow. This "white man [was dressed] in a suit of dirty, ragged linen," and was immediately identified by Wildman as a "Loafer" like the hundreds of impoverished white people the consul had seen "on the beach" in Singapore.<sup>17</sup> Just

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<sup>13</sup> James M Blaut, *The Colonizer's Model of the World: Geographical Diffusionism and Eurocentric History* (New York: Guilford Press, 1993), 1.

<sup>14</sup> Blaut, *The Colonizer's Model of the World*, 28.

<sup>15</sup> Blaut, *The Colonizer's Model of the World*, 53.

<sup>16</sup> Matthew F. Jacobson, *Barbarian Virtues: The United States Encounters Foreign Peoples at Home and Abroad, 1876-1917* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2000), 141.

<sup>17</sup> Rounseville Wildman, "In the Burst of the Southwest Monsoon," *Overland Monthly and Out West Magazine* 24, no. 143 (November 1894): 510.

as there was a hierarchy between races, so too could there be a hierarchy between white men. Apart from this complication, however, Wildman's writings largely conform to Rosaldo's Lone Ethnographer framework, reflecting the role of ethnography in justifying imperialism.

Besides reflecting the role of ethnography in imperialism, Wildman's articles reveal the relationship between the Lone Ethnographer and the natives. According to Rosaldo, "a strict division of labor separated the Lone Ethnographer from 'his native' sidekick."<sup>18</sup> Not all native people were depicted as inferior to white men – Wildman described the Sultan of Johore as "compar[ing] favorably with the best representatives of the Anglo-Saxon race" in his appearance.<sup>19</sup> Natives could even challenge the superiority of white men, as evidenced in Wildman's short story about the capture and imprisonment of two Americans by a *Panglima* (military commander).<sup>20</sup> Nevertheless, an overwhelming majority of the articles depict natives as subservient servants to Wildman and other Westerners. Wildman narrated how the Chinese "boy" Ah Minga obediently brings him his tea and fruit on Christmas Day.<sup>21</sup> Similarly, an unidentified Malay syce (groom) was depicted in a pen drawing as standing before Wildman, ready for his white master's orders.<sup>22</sup> Ah Minga, Jim the cook, and an unnamed water carrier even accompanied Wildman on a holiday to Raffles's Lighthouse, where the consul and his wife ironically played at being Robinson Crusoe by forgoing their creature comforts.<sup>23</sup> Wildman's reliance on servants was not unique – the Europeans in Singapore were also served by red-

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<sup>18</sup> Rosaldo, *Culture & Truth*, 31.

<sup>19</sup> Rounsevelle Wildman, "In the Court of Johore: The Crowning of a Malayan Prince," *Overland Monthly and Out West Magazine* 27, no. 158 (February 1896): 144.

<sup>20</sup> Rounsevelle Wildman, "The Panglima Muda: A Romance of Malaya," *Overland Monthly and Out West Magazine* 24, no. 140 (August 1894): 188-9.

<sup>21</sup> Rounsevelle Wildman, "A Christmas in the Topics," *The Youth's Companion*, no. 3474 (December 1893): 655.

<sup>22</sup> Wildman, "A New Year's Day in Malaya," 77.

<sup>23</sup> Wildman, "How We Played Robinson Crusoe," 36-7.

turbaned Malay *Kebuns* (gardeners) and Chinese “boys” in their bungalows.<sup>24</sup> Thus, Wildman’s articles evidence a division of labor where white people were occupied with leisure and important work (such as that of a consul), while the natives were consigned to being servants.

Wildman’s descriptions of his servants show how the Lone Ethnographer’s strict division of labor vis-à-vis the natives was not necessarily based on race. Unlike the first U.S. Orientalist writers, Wildman did not contribute to raced distinctions between the Orient and the United States. He did not, like Washington Irving (1783 – 1859) and Peter Markoe (c. 1752 to 1792), contrast Oriental despotism, with its harems and enslavement, with American virtue and liberty.<sup>25</sup> Rather, the consul, like Hugh Henry Brackenridge (1748 – 1816) of the Whiskey Rebellion, reminds us how empire-building was less about race and more about control.<sup>26</sup> Wildman appears less concerned with his racial superiority (as evidenced by his description of the Sultan of Johore), playing up instead his command over his native servants. Wildman stands in a long line of Westerners who have relied on native assistance, a line which includes David Livingstone (1813 – 1873) (rescued from a lion by Mebalwe, his servant) and the white explorers in *National Geographic* (some were photographed in a railroad cart pushed by Formosan men while others were pictured as being carried by New Guineans across a river).<sup>27</sup> Not all of these Westerners, including Wildman, were academic anthropologists. However, by virtue of their

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<sup>24</sup> Rounseville Wildman, "In the Golden Chersonese: The City of Singapore," *Overland Monthly and Out West Magazine* 25, no. 145 (January 1895): 51.

<sup>25</sup> Malini J. Schueller, "Algerian Slavery and the Liberty Vision: Royall Tyler, James Ellison, Susanna Rowson, Washington Irving, Peter Markoe," in *US Orientalisms: Race, Nation, and Gender in Literature, 1790-1890* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1998), 72-3.

<sup>26</sup> Edward Watts, "'If Indians Can Have Treaties, Why Cannot We Have One Too?': The Whiskey Rebellion and the Colonization of the West," in *Messy Beginnings: Postcoloniality and Early American Studies*, ed. Malini J. Schueller and Edward Watts (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2003), 98.

<sup>27</sup> Clare Pettitt, *Dr Livingstone I Presume: Missionaries, Journalists, Explorers and Empire* (London: Profile, 2007), 28. See also Catherine A. Lutz and Jane L. Collins, *Reading National Geographic* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1993).

command of native labor, these Westerners would likely have recognized the division of labor between themselves (as informal ethnographers) and the natives.

Thus far, an analysis of Wildman's magazine articles shows that the consul held an ethnographic perspective that largely conformed to Renato Rosaldo's Lone Ethnographer model. To recapitulate, the articles demonstrate the role of ethnography in imperialism and the relationship between the ethnographer and the natives. However, Wildman's observation and inquiry processes are less formal than the Lone Ethnographer's. Rosaldo describes, in a systematic fashion, the ethnographic process of his tripartite framework:

“Once upon a time, the Lone Ethnographer rode off into the sunset in search of ‘his native.’ After undergoing a series of trials, he encountered the object of his quest in a distant land. There he underwent his rite of passage by enduring the ultimate ordeal of ‘fieldwork.’ After collecting the ‘data,’ the Lone Ethnographer returned home and wrote a ‘true’ account of ‘the culture.’”<sup>28</sup>

This thorough, albeit difficult, process may be important to some academic anthropologists. To borrow Dominick LaCapra's “documentary” model of knowledge, these anthropologists may be similar to the historians who believe in an implicit or explicit hierarchy of sources where a “preferential position is accorded to seemingly direct informational documents such as bureaucratic reports, wills, registers, diaries, eye-witness accounts, and so forth.”<sup>29</sup> Such anthropologists may hence have pursued a fieldwork-based mode of ethnography as an attempt at legitimizing their work. They, like Perry Miller (1905 – 1963), might have seen themselves as conducting an *Errand into the Wilderness* to bring back the realities of native societies to a public expectant of romantic and exotic exploits.<sup>30</sup> This is not to say, however, that

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<sup>28</sup> Rosaldo, *Culture & Truth*, 30.

<sup>29</sup> Dominick LaCapra, "Rhetoric and History," in *History & Criticism* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1985), 18

<sup>30</sup> "Left Alone with America," in *Cultures of United States Imperialism*, ed. Amy Kaplan and Donald E. Pease (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1993), 3.

anthropologists are the only ethnographers who prize evidence obtained by direct observation. At the *National Geographic*, photographs were seen as “sections of reality” or “direct transcription[s] of reality.”<sup>31</sup> Magazine personnel went to great lengths to “get the picture,” flying across continents, traveling in difficult weather, and even scaling cliff faces and mountains.<sup>32</sup> The late 19<sup>th</sup> century saw an increase in the visibility of travel in the middle class cultural landscape of the United States.<sup>33</sup> With numerous books, magazines, and lectures jostling for the public’s attention, Wildman could have increased his popularity or legitimacy as a cultural commentator by playing up the difficulties of the ethnographic process in his writings.

Surprisingly, he did not. Perhaps because of his position as U.S. Consul, compared to the anthropologist or *National Geographic* photographer in the field, Wildman does not appear to suffer much in the ethnographic exploits detailed in his stories. His observations of native societies did not arise from a journey as tortuous as suggested in this “myth of hardship,” one marked by a “series of trials,” a “rite of passage,” and “the ultimate ordeal of ‘fieldwork.’” Apart from an expedition to a jungle-covered stream in the Pahang River, where Wildman awoke feeling faint and dripping with perspiration, Wildman generally described his surroundings as comfortably formal and befitting his station as a Consul.<sup>34</sup> To Wildman, the palace of the Sultan of Johore was akin to a “dreamland.”<sup>35</sup> He and the other guests to Prince Tunku Ibrahim’s (1873 – 1959) crowning were conducted to the luxurious grand salon, with its “[v]elvet carpets from Holland, divans from Turkey, rugs from Bokhara, tapestries from Persia, and lace from

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<sup>31</sup> Lutz and Collins, *Reading National Geographic*, 28.

<sup>32</sup> Lutz and Collons, *Reading National Geographic*, 66-8.

<sup>33</sup> Kristin L. Hoganson, "Girdling the Globe: The Fictive Travel Movement and the Rise of the Tourist Mentality," in *Consumers' Imperium: The Global Production of American Domesticity, 1865-1920* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2007), 170.

<sup>34</sup> Rounsevelle Wildman, "Baboo's Pirates," *Overland Monthly and Out West Magazine* 25, no. 148 (April 1895): 8-9.

<sup>35</sup> Wildman, "In the Court of Johore," 139.

France ... embroideries from China, cut glass from England, and rare old Satsuma ware from Japan.”<sup>36</sup> Wildman was treated similarly at the wedding ceremony of a *pungholo*’s daughter, where they were presented with an “honorable feast” of “goat and buffalo meat, of rice curry with forty sambuls, of ... luscious papayas.”<sup>37</sup> As such, Wildman’s opportunities for ethnographic observation (of native royal or wedding customs) were decidedly less arduous. Wildman was not the only Westerner to observe native societies from a relative position of comfort. However, committed to his official duties as a consul, Wildman did not conduct formal studies using anthropological methods of fieldwork. His ethnographic observations may be considered incidental to his work, and not his work itself.

Not only was Wildman’s observation process less formal than the Lone Ethnographer’s, but also his process of inquiry. In most instances, his articles did not explicitly illustrate the ethnographer’s thought-process described by Rosaldo. In other words, he did not “begin research with a set of questions, revise them throughout the course of inquiry, and in the end emerge with different questions [he] started with.”<sup>38</sup> Rather, Wildman’s essays tend to be simple narrations of a person, community, or event, which the same ethnographic perspective held throughout. For example, in “The White Rajah of Borneo” and “The Rajah of Sarawak,” he merely described the history of Sir Charles Brooke (1868 – 1917), whose uncle Sir James Brooke was the first rajah. Throughout both articles, Wildman heaped praises on the role of both men in “civilizing” the Sarawakians. It was only in his case-study of Little Busuk, where he examined the child’s growth into adulthood, that his ethnographic perspective changed. Initially presenting Busuk’s society as carefree and conducive to the child’s growth, he later lamented the *campong* (village)

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<sup>36</sup> Wildman, “In the Court of Johore,” 141.

<sup>37</sup>Rounsevelle Wildman, “The Rivals,” *Overland Monthly and Out West Magazine* 24, no. 144 (December 1894): 613-4.

<sup>38</sup> Rosaldo, *Culture & Truth*, 7.

of Passir Panjang as a place where Busuk wastes away. Married at the young age of fifteen, Busuk's shoulders soon became bent, her face wrinkled, and her teeth decayed and falling out from the use of syrah leaf.<sup>39</sup> Wildman then questioned where her future lay. Aside from this new question, Wildman generally did not appear to consider any future inquiries into the subjects of his articles. In this aspect, Wildman does not consciously follow the ethnographic process of the Lone Ethnographer. He was unconcerned with explaining the histories of these subjects by testing general laws in specific instances to verify, modify, or question them.<sup>40</sup>

According to Rosaldo, the ethnographer "occupies a position or structural location and observes with a particular angle of vision ... life experiences both enable and inhibit particular kinds of insight."<sup>41</sup> As an American in intimate contact with the native societies of the Malay Archipelago, Rounseville Wildman was able to write like a Lone Ethnographer. Even as Wildman was not an academic anthropologist, his writings still illustrated the role of ethnography in imperialism and the relationship between ethnographer and native. However, constrained by his position as the U.S. Consul, Wildman was unable to engage formally in the ethnographic process. Nonetheless, Wildman played an anthropological role, anchoring American knowledge of the Malay Archipelago through his writings on its specific groups and societies.<sup>42</sup>

## About the author

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<sup>39</sup> Wildman, "Malayan Child-Life," 500.

<sup>40</sup> LaCapra, "Rhetoric and History," 27.

<sup>41</sup> Rosaldo, *Culture & Truth*, 19.

<sup>42</sup> Johannes Fabian, "Conclusions," in *Time and the Other: How Anthropology Makes Its Object* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1983), 143.

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