

# Of attitudes, race and bigotry: meet Molly and the Rajah

Although it was a long shot, Coralie Younger wrote off to a few libraries in southern India for more details. Eighteen months passed as the wheels of Indian bureaucracy turned slowly around. Finally came a letter. One library had unearthed an old newspaper article with names and dates. From there, Younger referred to the leading Australian journal of the day, the *Bulletin*, and it was then she realised that she had a story on her hands.

She approached Edward Duyker, a writer and friend of Younger, who had spent some time in India in the '70s gathering research for a PhD dissertation. Duyker agreed that the tantalising information found so far warranted further investigation, with a view to eventual publication.

Over the next five years, Younger and Kuyler criss-crossed the world, interviewing monarchs and society figures, sifting through medical, legal and FBI documents and articles. The story they pieced together is extraordinary. It documents the tragic lives of two people from different cultures who married for love but faced hate, rejection and prejudice for ever after.

Entitled *Molly and the Rajah: Race, Romance and the Raj*, the book was recently launched by ABC Radio National's Bill Bunbury, producer of the *Talking History* and *Word of Mouth* programmes. Younger and Duyker resisted the temptation to 'flesh-out' the facts in the book with fiction. *Molly and the Rajah* is a rigorous historical account and any surmising is clearly stated.

Molly Fink was just 20 years old when in 1915 she married Martanda Bhairava Tondaiman, the Rajah of Pudukkottai, a 3,000 sq km principality in the arid heel of southern India. The daughter of Wolf Fink, a Melbourne barrister, and a niece of Sir Theodore Fink, the owner of the *Herald and Weekly Times*, Molly and her sister Ida were popular young players in Melbourne society. The *Bulletin* described the sisters as

*"two big-eyed darlings with oval ivory-skinned faces and pouting pomegranate lips. They look as if they should be dressed in Persian 'bags' and veils."* The Rajah, aged 39, was holidaying in Australia when he first saw Molly in the dining room of Sydney's Australia Hotel. He sought, unsuccessfully, an introduction acknowledging later to the press that he had fallen in love upon first sight. When Molly and family headed for the cool air of the Blue Mountains, he followed. A romance blossomed at the Hydro Majestic Hotel.

Five months later on 6 August 1915, Molly and the Rajah were married. In light of her Jewish/Catholic parentage and his Hindu background the marriage was confined to Melbourne's Registrar-General's office. Molly's father had died the previous year. Her mother, now with limited means, posed no objections to the match.

The press went wild. The *Melbourne Punch* wrote: *"The outside fringes of Society's robe have been somewhat agitated of late, for one of its precariously adhering particles has wedded a coloured man. Mrs Newly Wed brought her coffee-coloured prince to proudly present him to her envious acquaintances. What was her surprise to find them not envious! All agree that he is a charming and cultured man to meet -- but not marry. Fortunately for herself the wife is quite contented and excitedly shows all the girls she knows her beautiful diamonds, telling them very shortly afterwards what they cost. Several calls which the newly-married pair have paid have not been a huge success."*

Society's agitation was exceeded only by that of the authorities. Britain demanded a full briefing on the new Rani. The Australian Government was able to confirm that *'Her parents were highly respectable people, her late father being an MA and LLM of the Melbourne University and a man of considerable culture and literary ability.'*

However Britain deemed the marriage morganatic and refused its recognition. George V and Britain's authorities in India agreed that: *Molly's entertainment by British officials in India be as private as possible; private lunches and tea parties were informal garden parties, boxes at race meetings were out. Any form of private entertainment in public places was unacceptable. The Queen should not receive her privately except as Molly Fink. [Her] name was not to appear in official documents or be used on public occasions. She was not permitted to use the title "Her Highness."*

Likewise, in Australia, the pair were to be excluded from every official function given by agents of the British Government.

Back in India, further trouble awaited the pair. While shunned by officialdom, the population of Pudukkottai appeared to welcome the return of their Rajah and his new Rani. However, soon after realising that she was pregnant, Molly became plagued by persistent dystentery. Samples of her bile were sent for analysis and it was revealed that she was the victim of oleander poisoning, used commonly in India to induce miscarriage and sometimes murder. The Rajah's heir was hushed up. Charges were never laid.

The Rajah tried to buy a house in a hill station in a neighbouring state in which Molly might safely await the birth of their baby. The British Government blocked the move, claiming that the British officers who used the town as a holiday retreat would be offended by their presence. Molly and the Rajah returned to Sydney. Shortly after, Martanda Sydney Tondaiman, Rajkumar (prince) of Pudukkottai was born.

Molly refused to set foot in India until she was officially recognised. Martanda returned in 1919 and com-

plained to Lord Willindon, the Governor of Madras: "What have I done wrong? I am married duly and in order. I love my wife. I don't want another. Am I such a dreadful creature that I must be treated like this?" In a letter read to King George, Lord Willindon wrote: *He is such a good fellow, so intensely loyal and white in his ways that I should be grateful if you can help him in any way...from the domestic point of view, too, the position for them is quite intolerable...He is so English in his ways and by his upbringing that he can't go on as things are now..."*

In January 1921, after a final ruling by King George that the marriage would not be sanctioned, the Rajah relinquished his authority over Pudukkottai. It was not an abdication. The British Government was concerned that such a formal step would cause further instability.

The Rajah left India with a cash payout and a generous annual allowance. He and Molly settled in Cannes on the Riviera where their extravagant lifestyle must have provided compensation of sorts for their Indian exile. They mixed freely with the French and Russian aristocracy and were close friends of the Duke and Duchess of Kent.

In 1928 in Paris, at the age of 53, the Rajah died. Molly appealed to the Governor of Madras for her husband's body to be returned to Pudukkottai for cremation and a Hindu burial. The request was refused.

Following her husband's death, Molly was linked romantically with various men, including the Agha Khan (who actually sought her hand in marriage) and photographer Cecil Beaton.

The young Martanda proved a great disappointment to his mother. With his peripatetic early life, his father's early death and a constant question mark about his status and future, the young prince's upbringing was unsettled and lonely. The cartoonist, Osbert Lancaster, referred to the boy in his memoirs, after encountering Molly at a restaurant at Cap d'Antibes about 1931: *[One] could respect, without*

*fully understanding, the tender regard with which the Ranee of Pudukkottai watched her teenage son with gilded toe-nails and made up to the nines, feeding asparagus tips to a pet tortoise with a diamond-encrusted shell.* In 1938 Martanda left his exclusive Swiss boarding school and began a degree at Cambridge. Before completing his studies, he was involved in a car accident, leaving members of his travelling party dead and giving him bad facial scarring and a permanent limp.



A close friend of the Shah of Iran (the two had attended the same Swiss school -- the Shah once offered Martanda an ambassadorship), Molly's son mixed in high circles but had few friends. In 1945, he was sentenced to prison in the United States for the theft of \$10,000 worth of jewels. It was not his first offence, but in the past his mother had managed to return his booty and avoid scandal.

According to FBI documents, after 10 months in Sing Sing Prison, Martanda was deported to Cuba. The judge in charge of the case told him: *"You are a thief and this country is glad to be rid of you."*

As the years progressed Molly became more and more reclusive. Once a regular guest at society parties and first nights, her photo no longer dotted *Tattler* and *Vogue*. She took to drinking large quantities of gin and finally, in 1967, died of cancer in her apart-

ment in Cannes.

Martanda died alone in Florence in 1984 surrounded by pictures of his mother, burning candles and vases of flowers, leaving the bulk of his estate to the People's Dispensary for Sick Animals.

Molly's only brother Oswald, whose wife had committed suicide, died in 1980. His chemist and cleaning lady were the only mourners at his funeral. Molly's sister Ida, whose bid for stardom in Hollywood never took off, died not long after her famous sister. Compiling the book proved an extraordinary challenge for Younger and Duyker.

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here was no diary, nor were there descendants or many friends. Those relatives of Molly who were still alive had little to say. Molly's maid, now living in Sloane Square in London, sold Younger the family photo album and fleshed out the details of Molly's character and private life. However, the bulk of details in the book was obtained by laborious searches through official records in Australia, England, India, France, Italy, Switzerland and the United States.

"Molly and the Rajah is a tale of chicanery, racial hatred and lives thwarted," says Younger. "On the one hand, it is impossible not to feel great sadness for the Rajah and his family at the bigotry they faced from both Australia and Imperial Britain. At the same time, that compassion is tempered by the knowledge that their decadent lifestyle was funded by the state coffers of Pudukkottai, whose subjects lived in appalling poverty."

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ounger is at present continuing her MA research on Australian attitudes to India in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Duyker is writing a biography of the naturalist Daniel Solander. *Molly and the Rajah* is published by Australian Mauritian Press, PO Box 20, Sylvania, NSW, 2224.

*This article was written by Vivienne Skinner and reprinted here with the kind permission of Ms Skinner and the University of Sydney.*