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*Companion Series*

# GENDER AND EMPIRE

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THE OXFORD HISTORY OF THE BRITISH EMPIRE

COMPANION SERIES

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# *Gender and Empire*

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# FOREWORD

The purpose of the five volumes of the Oxford History of the British Empire was to provide a comprehensive survey of the Empire from its beginning to end, to explore the meaning of British imperialism for the ruled as well as the rulers, and to study the significance of the British Empire as a theme in world history. The volumes in the Companion Series carry forward this purpose. They pursue themes that could not be covered adequately in the main series while incorporating recent research and providing fresh interpretations of significant topics.

Wm. Roger Louis

# PREFACE

In the past three or four decades or so, a new attention to issues of gender and gender role has transformed historical scholarship, not merely adding women to an already rich historical tapestry, but also suggesting exciting new ways to think about the field. This new attention to how the social and sexual roles assigned both to men and to women has, in the past two decades or so, also had a significant impact on the writing of British imperial history. Such work has looked not only at the role of women within the Empire, but has also been keenly interested in exploring why the Empire was so dominantly male an environment for so long.

In one register, historians have begun to examine specifically the effects of Empire and of colonial conquest and development on indigenous and migrant women. Even a cursory glance at colonial labour markets will show that colonized women worked in jobs that, in Britain, would not have been open to them. In India, and elsewhere in the colonies, women worked in the building trade and in heavy manual labour as well as in areas more traditionally associated with female work: domestic service, agriculture, sex work, and other service jobs. Just as was the case for the working women of Britain, they also shouldered the bulk of childcare and personal domestic labour in their own households, but while they shared many such strains and stresses with white working-class women in the metropole, they were also often subject to greater control than their British counterparts as imperial social reform began to characterize colonial rule from the middle of the nineteenth century. Historians investigating the lives of colonial women thus look simultaneously at the impact of colonization and at customs and laws that predate colonialism, investigating how the former has shaped and changed the latter, and how this might have affected the lives of women.

With a focus more upon the West and its effects on Empire, historians have also demonstrated how central Western women were to imperial development, despite their traditional absence from its historical record. Alongside the intrepid women explorers and travellers who cast off traditional female roles and recognized in Empire the possibility of adventure unattainable at home, an increasing percentage of the white imperial population, especially from the mid-nineteenth century, was female. British women

came to work in the colonies as doctors and nurses, as barmaids and servants, as farmworkers and in a host of other industries and employments. Many came as single women, hoping that the female job market in the colonies would be wider, better, and more lucrative than that which they could access at home. Women came, too, as wives of farmers and farm labourers, of businessmen and soldiers and civil servants, and salesmen and scholars. How different were their lives from those they might have led had they stayed at home? What effects did colonial living, temporary or permanent, have on how women understood their role and place in society?

Such questions, often central to the new scholarship on gender and Empire, suggest also that explicit connections between domestic policy and the politics of Empire form a fruitful area of enquiry. It is all too easy to see home as 'here' and Empire as 'out there', when in reality the connections between Britain and its Empire were close and critical. Whether one looks at economic ties, wartime alliances, or migration policies, the connections are palpable. Scholars of gender have pushed that idea a logical step further, examining, for example, how women fighting for a political voice in Britain self-consciously fashioned a rhetoric about their superiority to, and protection of, their 'lesser' colonial sisters. Such studies have neatly demonstrated the interconnections between 'home' and Empire not just at the material level of policy but also in the circulation and exchange of ideas.

The scholarship on gender and Empire is not, however, exclusively concerned with the position and role of women. In examining the roles ascribed to people as a result of gender, in highlighting both the similarities and differences between expectations about male and female behaviour, in being sensitive to the ways in which language and ideas reflect or challenge dominant social roles, historians of gender are also well positioned to wonder why the Empire has for so long been represented as a virtually exclusive masculine preserve. Even now, popular representations of Empire tend to focus on men and on traditionally male pursuits. New scholarship has shown unequivocally that the story of Empire is a far more complex one, and that the image of masculinity so intimately associated with imperialism is itself a topic worth investigating.

Gender, then, connotes more than simply the 'returning' of women to stories of Empire and expansion, and all of these issues are among the questions taken up in this volume. The intent of these chapters is to offer readers interested by the *OHBE* project a more inclusive interpretation of the

significance of Empire and of the importance of gender, studying the experiences of men as well as women and exploring how the different roles ascribed to men and women affected the course of imperial history over a period of some three centuries.

In any new field, and perhaps more especially where scholars draw self-consciously on other disciplines, a new and specialized vocabulary is bound to develop, and while that vocabulary quickly becomes recognizable in a professional environment, there will always be some words that the general reader will find unfamiliar. For the most part these words are clear from their context, and we have tried in this volume to be consistent in their usage. Still, it may be worthwhile to define here several terms that have only recently acquired widespread currency, and which the general reader may not yet have encountered in the context of historical writing.

The etymology of the word *homosocial* would suggest that it refers to social activities or relationships amongst similar persons. For feminist and gender scholarship, its meaning is more precise and extremely valuable, connoting communities or societies not only composed solely of men, but exhibiting or endorsing behaviours or characteristics more readily associated – certainly historically—with men. Thus the rough and ready frontier societies of the settler colonies were not merely peopled in their early days almost exclusively by men, but were also characterized by hard drinking, lawlessness, and a disregard for polite social norms.

The verb *translate* is used in these pages as a tool for investigating how cultures understood one another, how certain practices, customs or ideas as well as words did or did not 'translate' across cultural as well as linguistic boundaries. It is, of course, a literary term, and one which offers a far nore nuanced picture than would the verb *understand.* For while a 'mistranslation' is also often a misunderstanding, it is less about confusion than about incommensurability, the non-equivalence of ideas or customs in different parts of the world. The concept of 'translation', with its emphasis on correspondence, clearly offers a deeper mode of investigation.

While 'translation' is a term historians have borrowed from literature, *companionate marriage* is a term indelibly associated with the work of a historian: the early modern historian of marriage and family, Lawrence Stone. The term is used to distinguish between marriages in which women were a commodity and an investment to their husbands and those – dubbed companionate – in which affection and companionship were key components. A companionate marriage was not necessarily a marriage of equals, but

it did assume companionship as a significant factor in a couple's nuptials, regarding matrimony rather than purely as a business arrangement.

Some of these new terms are more well known than others; all of them fulfil helpful functions which allow historians a certain leeway or shorthand in expressing sometimes complex and often innovative ideas. In this volume our belief is that the introduction of new and exciting concepts via this terminology will help readers grasp the significances and nuances of considering gender and empire in the same breath and will, at the same time, help move forward the purpose of the *Oxford History of the British Empire* in new directions and new areas of study.

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Philippa Levine

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# CONTENTS

# 1

# *Introduction: Why Gender and Empire?*

PHILIPPA LEVINE

The British Empire always seems a very masculine enterprise, a series of far-flung sites, dominated by white men dressed stiffly in sporting and hunting clothes, or ornate official regalia. The Empire was, in many ways, a deeply masculine space of this sort, but acknowledging that reality tells only a fraction of the story. Such a depiction obscures both colonized populations (who in most places out-numbered the colonizing), and the growing numbers of colonizing women who also lived and worked in colonial settings. To think about gender and empire, however, is not only to re-populate the stage with a more diverse cast of historical protagonists but to explore social processes and power using sexual difference as a key but by no means unique analytic.

Studying gender means, of course, far more than acknowledging the actions and presence of women, and more, too, than merely arguing that the British Empire was run by men and in ways that they claimed were universal, but which materially differentiated on grounds of sex as well as other kinds of social divisions. The premise of this volume goes deeper, arguing that in addition to these factors in understanding the Empire, the very idea as well as the building of empires themselves cannot be understood without employing a gendered perspective. In an earlier volume in the Oxford History of the British Empire series (vol. IV), Rosalind O'Hanlon reminds us that 'men too are gendered as are the public political arenas which some of them dominate'.[1] To that end, we cannot, for example, understand why particular policies or laws were enacted, or why Empire developed as it did and in the areas it did, without seeing at work the hand of gender: why men were politically dominant; what role women were supposed to play and

[1] Rosalind O'Hanlon, 'Gender in the British Empire', in Judith M. Brown and Wm. Roger Louis, eds., *The Oxford History of the British Empire. IV. The Twentieth Century* (Oxford, 1999), p. 396.

what roles they actually claimed for themselves; how decisions, major and minor, affected the lives of everyone touched by, responsible for, and on the receiving end of colonial doings. In the chapters that follow, a distinguished group of feminist historians vividly demonstrate the critical ways in which the construction, practice, and experience of Empire for both colonizer and colonized was always and everywhere gendered, that is to say, influenced in every way by people's understanding of sexual difference and its effects, and by the roles of men and women in the world.

To see gender as central to our understanding of the complicated processes at work in British colonialism is not, however, to claim that gender is universally recognizable as the same or as having the same effects and influences in all places or at all times. On the contrary, one of the lessons of feminist history has been about the dangers of too readily assuming that group identifications always work: that all men, for example, opposed greater female participation in the public sphere or liked to play sports, that all Britons supported colonial expansion, or that all colonized peoples found colonial rule an encumbrance. Such generalizations are invariably inaccurate, yet historical writing is often surprisingly full of claims that come close to stating such bald fictions. The relevant point here is that in invoking gender as a significant historical consideration by no means presupposes that experiences of colonial practice were common to all women or all men. Instead, what this analytical tool signifies is 'the multiple and contradictory meanings attached to sexual difference', and how these multiplicities shaped and influenced the way people lived their daily lives and how they thought about the world around them.[2]

Equally important in emphasizing the rejection of universalist explanations is the view, apparent in all the chapters which follow, that an understanding of gender does not stand alone or somehow 'above' other factors, such as class and race, also at work. In particular, the emphasis on inequalities, which gendered interpretations necessarily highlight, reminds us that other important divisions also structure colonialism. Differences in material wealth and social status, hierarchies based on race and skin colour, and other such divisions are also always at work in social relations. Gender in short is always central to the ways in which social relations have been navigated, built, and secured as well as challenged and resisted. The contributors to this volume stress what Susan Thorne has called an 'inchoate interdependence'

[2] Joan Wallach Scott, *Gender and the Politics of History* (New York, 1988), p. 25.

between gender and those other social categories that shape and influence peoples' lives and the power structures in which they are located.[3]

Whether we focus on gender, race, or class or—more commonly—a combination of these factors, as historians we must maintain a sensitivity to change. Attitudes to political representation among and for colonial subjects have undergone significant change, for example, during the period of Empire, changes that make sense only if we understand them in the light of these critical categories of difference. When the American colonists declared their independence from Britain, a move enshrined above all in the principle of political representation, the prevailing ideas about gender and race served to exclude from these new rights Native Americans, forcibly imported and enslaved Africans, and all women. All of these groups were prevented from exercising the franchise that was at the heart of the new American constitution. Some hundred years later and continents away, the governor of Hong Kong, Sir John Pope Hennessy, championed the cause of political representation for the numerically dominant Chinese population of the colony. His focus—quite radical for the period—was none the less limited to the educated, Westernized, and always male merchant elites, ignoring the majority, the labouring population, who literally built the colony. Gender and class thus shaped his quite radical and controversial insistence that the Chinese deserved a voice in colonial governance. In both instances, then, the idea of extending political rights was moulded by prevailing ideas about gender and about race, about the relative participation of men and women, of subjects and citizens, but in every case shaped by local circumstance and context. While both these examples demonstrate that considerations around various forms of difference (social, economic, sexual, racial) were always at work, they also reveal that these considerations did not operate everywhere in the same way. Hennessey's arguments could not have swayed the British community in Hong Kong or indeed in Britain in the 1850s, just as the vision of the founding fathers required later amendment, as values and ideas about the organization of difference changed in the years after the Constitution was written.

Amendments to the American Constitution guaranteeing voting rights to former slaves and to women are historical markers of change which should caution us against employing universalizing and totalizing historical inter-

[3] Susan Thorne, *Congregational Missions and the Making of an Imperial Culture in Nineteenth-Century England* (Stanford, Calif., 1999), p. 92.

pretations. As America changed, alterations to its basic political organization were deemed necessary. The same was so in colonial contexts where discussions about the political representation of the colonized became increasingly common in the twentieth century, but again, not everywhere. India's contributions, both military and economic, to the First World War made some concession to Indian nationalist demands unavoidable. In Hong Kong, by contrast, despite the changes ushered in by Hennessy in the nineteenth century, governance remained wholly unrepresentative, with officials appointed rather than elected, until 1985. Clearly different instances of how race and gender (probably the two most significant factors affecting electoral rights, as property ownership waned as a qualifier) operated shaped decisions about voting rights in these varied locations. India, Hong Kong, the United States all at some stage faced these issues but the outcome, the attitudes, the arguments in each were contingent upon time and location, invariably producing different results and different struggles.

The relationship between gender and Empire also offers us the opportunity to re-imagine some of the traditional periodizations which have shaped historical writings. Astute readers will appreciate the difficulties faced most especially by Kathleen Wilson, Catherine Hall, and Barbara Bush in this collection. Their contributions provide overviews of a century's worth of colonial experience rather than a single topical theme. No clear breaks separate these three centuries; indeed, Barbara Bush argues that those characteristics we most often identify as typifying the twentieth century—an increased emphasis on Western-style democracy foremost among them—date from the period after the First World War, after almost one-fifth of the century had passed. Yet many of the changes of the post–1918 years can equally be traced back to earlier periods, complicating any simple and neat definition of what constitutes the characteristics of any particular century. As Kathleen Wilson points out, eighteenth-century thinkers prided themselves, not least because of the existence of a British Empire, on what they saw as their own modernity. Rather than seeing Bush and Wilson as disparate in their views of when modernity 'occurred', adopting a perspective grounded in a gendered methodology allows us to appreciate the historical-ness of such seeming contradiction. Periodization—often neatly packaged as the 'Victorian age', the 'post-war years', 'high imperialism', and so forth—is a useful convenience on the one hand, but a misleading and often rigid problem, on the other. Since gendered analyses encourage us to reject totalizing interpretations in favour of contingent ones sensitive to context, they also necessarily