

IAN TYRRELL

REFORMING
THE WORLD

THE CREATION
OF AMERICA'S
MORAL EMPIRE



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Ian Tyrrell



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Reforming the World



AMERICA IN THE WORLD

SVEN BECKERT AND JEREMI SURI, *series editors*

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the Construction of an American World Order*, by David Ekbladh

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*To my fellow historian colleagues in the United States,
who have helped beyond measure
in their generosity and openness*

AS WELL AS

*Robert James Tyrrell, long lost, but found
and
Doris Priscilla Tyrrell (1910–1994), not forgotten*

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Marrickville, NSW, Australia, July 2009

ABBREVIATIONS

ABCFM	American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions
ASL	Anti-Saloon League of America
BHLM	Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan
BWTA	British Women's Temperance Association
IVA	International Voluntary Association
KFYMCAA	Kautz Family YMCA Archives, University of Minnesota Libraries
LC	Library of Congress
MHC-OHS	Michigan Historical Collections/Ohio Historical Society
NA	National Archives of the United States
NAW	<i>Notable American Women, 1607–1950: A Biographical Dictionary</i> , ed. Edward T. James with Janet Wilson James, associate ed., 3 vols. (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1971)
SEAP	<i>Standard Encyclopedia of the Alcohol Problem</i>
SVM	Student Volunteer Movement for Foreign Missions
WBMHL	Women's Board of Missions: Supplementary Papers and Correspondence, 1873–1947, ABC 9.5.1, Houghton Library, Harvard University
WCTU	Woman's Christian Temperance Union
WCTUHQ	Woman's Christian Temperance Union Headquarters, Evanston, IL
WLAA	World League Against Alcoholism
WPF	World Prohibition Federation
YDSL	Yale Divinity School Library
YMCA	Young Men's Christian Association
YPSCE	Young People's Society of Christian Endeavor
YWCA	Young Women's Christian Association

Reforming the World

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Introduction

GOD, GOLD, AND GLORY. This is the trio of “G’s” that many a history student has memorized to understand the motives for European imperialism. The same student would also learn that the 1890s witnessed an upsurge in American overseas “expansion,” marking the emergence of the United States as a world power. Not literally for gold did they go overseas, but Americans traded abroad, looking for markets and resources. They also sent missionaries on behalf of the Christian God. In the name of humanitarian intervention, they even acquired colonies across the seas.¹ Rudyard Kipling called on Americans to take up the white man’s burden, and for a time they did. Republican Party politicians promised benevolent tutelage and improvement as the destiny for the Philippines, Puerto Rico, and the other islands that fell into the American grasp after the Spanish-American War of 1898. Glory was not absent either. American foreign policy took on a more vigorous tone, and the Caribbean became effectively an American lake in which military intervention was promised—if European powers failed to heed the Monroe Doctrine. Soon Cuba, then Nicaragua, Honduras, Panama, Haiti, Mexico, the Dominican Republic, and other places felt the American military footprint. A pattern of controlling other peoples through military and financial power had been set. All this appeared to be the product of a restless, expansionist economy and culture.

At the time, prominent historians had no trouble conceiving of this activity as empire, nor did many politicians. Those who supported and those who opposed the colonial acquisitions of 1898 tended not to argue over whether the United States was an empire but whether imperialism was a good thing. Yet for decades thereafter, empire came to be a dirty word in the American lexicon. When Admiral George Dewey, the “hero of Manila,” returned in 1899 triumphant from the defeat of the Spanish navy in the Philippines in July 1898, the proud citizens of New York raised a victory arch modeled on the precedents of classical Rome. The Beaux-Arts edifice told in its sculptures and inscriptions of an American fleet triumphant, uniting the East and West Indies in one world. But, in 1900, efforts to raise money for a permanent version of the hastily constructed monument faltered, and the original plaster of Paris and cement structure soon had to be removed because the elements had taken their toll.² Americans had begun to forget their empire. When the Wilson administration came to power in 1913 it initiated moves for Philippinization of the colonial government. The United States withdrew its occupy-

ing force from Cuba in 1902 and Congress affirmed in 1903 the terms of that nation's "independence," though with restrictions that smacked of informal American control, and Hawaii was admitted as a territory in 1898. Distant Samoa, tiny Guam in the Pacific, and Puerto Rico joined the Philippines under American rule, but Americans swept their island empire under the rug with the euphemism of the "insular possessions," and a Bureau of Insular Affairs, not a "colonial office," to run them. Though intermittently raised as an issue or made central to analysis of American history by intrepid scholars in the 1920s and 1930s, the expansionism of the 1890s to 1914 characteristically appeared thereafter in history books as an aberration. Many believed that Americans did not "do" or "seek" empire, as Donald Rumsfeld put it so pithily.³ A great many books have recently been written about American empire,⁴ but scholarly and public debate still struggles over the terms of the discussion, because the American experience did not seem to fit classical European imperialism. This comparative approach tends to treat American expansion overseas and other empires as self-contained entities to be contrasted.⁵ The approach falsely creates an ideal type of empire based on formal acquisition of territories, an established imperial ruling class, hostility to decolonization, and the treatment of colonial peoples as dependents.

Whatever the terminological quibbles over the course of empire in American history as a whole, it is clear that the United States did have an empire in the years before World War I. That the formal colonies were limited in scope should not hide that fact; nor should terminology obscure the extensive informal empire that the United States developed through both economic techniques and military intervention. American actions encompassed a "conscious" (if often temporary) "desire to conquer" and a persistent pattern of political and economic domination that arguably conforms to commonsense definitions of informal empire.⁶ Nor should the exercise of moral and cultural influence be ignored, where directed toward supporting either formal or informal imperial control. These efforts might simply be ideological, but they may also be material ones in providing support for the colonial state in the contracting out of social and cultural services.

In this book I wish to broaden the context of the drive toward American imperialism—situating it within wider patterns of informal American expansion and the transnational networks implicated in those patterns. While the informal empire of free trade and the Open Door policy is a concept extensively explored by others,⁷ nineteenth-century moral reform as another and arguably important part of informal and formal U.S. empire has not been the subject of much analysis beyond a few individual case studies.⁸ Americans exported a wide variety of organizations designed for moral uplift, from the well-known and influential

Woman's Christian Temperance Union and Young Men's (and Women's) Christian Association to the less well-known or totally obscure, such as the King's Daughters, the International Anti-Cigarette League, and the World's Good Habits Society.⁹ Collectively, I call such groups "moral reformers." In their enterprise to improve both morally and materially the countries to which they went, they were joined by an immense array of missionary forces, including the boards of the denominational churches that administered overseas work, raised money, and kept the faithful at home informed. These groups were not identical in aims, structures, pet causes, or impacts, but they networked and overlapped extensively in their strategies, tactics, and ideologies. They also cooperated and lobbied within the United States to promote moral reform abroad. However, none of this activity was exclusively an American domain. Some of these societies had key foreign organizers and supporters and some were first created in other countries though later adapted or transformed in the United States. Their work exhibited transnational influences upon the United States, even as the tendency over time was for the work to become more American centered and the transnational influence less reciprocal.

All of these groups were part of a larger universe of American cultural expansion that included tourists, popular culture, and sporting groups. Though often of considerable importance, these activities rarely took organizational form or became closely connected with American empire. When they did, as with the export of baseball to the Caribbean, the Pacific, and East Asia, these aspects of the spread of American culture often either occurred through the work of missionaries or mimicked the missionaries. Albert G. Spalding, the promoter who undertook a world tour in 1888–89 to spread the influence of baseball, followed in the tracks of the moral reformers and explicitly called his players "Base Ball missionaries."¹⁰

American cultural expansion abroad may be analyzed using the terminology of "soft power," but there are better approaches. Coined to describe the cultural and social influences exerted by the United States abroad in recent decades, the term lacks precision, the boundaries between soft and "hard" power are difficult to establish, and little agency can be given to the people subject to this power. More preferable for the study of moral reform is an older term. Cultural hegemony means not "domination" as raw power but the exercise of power under a shared moral and political order in which that power is the subject of multi-lateral contestation among nations and classes.¹¹ Power is the product of ruled as well as rulers, of subordinate as well as dominant nations. This power is reciprocal in its practices. Effects do not simply proceed outward but flow inward as events, circumstances, and people abroad influence the United States.

The focus here is not the larger patterns of American economic and cultural integration with the wider world¹² but the organizational and cultural changes in American voluntary reform abroad from the 1880s to the 1920s. Nor does this book concentrate on the reception of American reform ideas outside the United States. That would require not just one study but many, dealing with the complexities and specifics of very diverse societies to which Americans pitched their missionary messages. This is, however, a book about moral reformers exporting their ideas, interacting with one another in the process, and responding to stimuli from abroad in shaping their programs.

Moral reform groups and missionaries often thought of their work as analogous to empire—but a kind of Christian moral empire that rose above “nation,” and one nobler in aspiration than the grubby motives of gold and glory.¹³ Catholics were not part of this movement. Evangelical missionaries did not regard Rome as an ally abroad, but eyed Roman Catholics and Eastern Orthodox Christians as sources of potential converts to a purer form of faith. And the Catholic Church saw the United States itself as a mission field, not a source of missionary enterprise.¹⁴ The relationship between Protestant reformers’ aspiration to create a more Christian and moral world on the one hand and the emergence of American imperialism and colonialism beginning in 1898 on the other is at the heart of what follows. Cultural expansion in the form of missionaries and moral reform enlarged what could be termed the external “footprint” of the United States in the 1880s and 1890s, creating conditions wherein a more vigorous economic and political expansion could be seriously considered. American reformers fashioned their own version of a non-territorial “empire” grounded in networks of moral reform organizations that pursued innovative policies and sought a hegemonic position within the world of voluntary, non-government action across the Euro-American world and its colonies. In the process, American reformers articulated a vision that was global. The emergence of American formal empire in 1898 posed a challenge to this distinctive configuration, and moral reform organizations met formal imperialism’s growth by developing a loose coalition of Christian groups that lobbied for changes to the United States’ relationships with its colonies and the wider world. This informal coalition settled for a time after 1898 around the work of Wilbur F. Crafts and the American-based International Reform Bureau. The groups associated with his work conceded that American empire did include colonies that provided opportunities for Christian proselytizing, but formal empire was not to be their major focus. The larger project of moral reformers to remake the world in terms of Protestant cultural values was vigorously reasserted by the moral coalition. In the era of World War I and its aftermath, this approach grew stronger and displaced as

much as complemented reform of the formal empire. Throughout I argue that the boundaries between Christian evangelical networks operating on a transnational level and formal empire were blurred, with the latter phenomenon essentially embedded within the former.

While talk of networks is now becoming popular in theorizing about transnational political movements in the contemporary world,¹⁵ the deeper pedigree of such movements has rarely been studied and still more rarely theorized. The practical way that networks operated in the history of American empire is imperfectly understood.¹⁶ This book considers the analytical framework of these networks and provides the empirical detail required to trace their operation and impacts. In the process it outlines the fascinating broader context of American moral expansionism from the 1870s to the 1920s. Building up a picture of such networks requires more than theory. Political scientists interested in transnational social movements consider a range of characteristics including denseness of communication, patterns of agenda setting, and lobbying, among other things, but such concepts are essentially empirical and descriptive.¹⁷ Studying networks requires patient documentation of how people across different fields got to know and support one another. These networks depended on the life histories, aspirations, and cultural heritage of moral reformers. This book tells the stories of such people.

Historians are beginning to reassess religion's role in American life, and a key element in this reassessment must be the role of evangelical missionary and moral reform institutions during the era of high European imperialism.¹⁸ "Cultural imperialism" is, as we shall see, too blunt an instrument to fully comprehend these relationships, but connections with the power of colonialism and imperialism there certainly were.¹⁹ The association between religion and Protestant morality on the one hand and American expansion on the other might seem far from new. After all, Manifest Destiny, popularized as a phrase during the annexation of Texas and the subsequent war with Mexico, had an explicit religious justification. The moral movement of the 1880s to the 1920s was not, however, one of rhetorical justification for expansion but intrinsic to that process. It concerned the shaping of expansion and often the criticism of expansion that did not conform to evangelical morals; it was far from simply being a gloss on power. Along a similar vein, it might be argued that the Christian mobilization beginning in the 1880s was merely a continuation of the missions to the Indians of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. No doubt the memory of Puritan heroes and heroines of that time spurred missionary zeal into new efforts to carry the Gospel into "heathen lands." Yet the first turn toward overseas missionary work came in the 1810s and 1820s—long before the 1880s, when external stimuli proved more important.²⁰ Nor is the more general argument valid that