

**Norman Etherington, ed.** *Missions and Empire*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005. xiii + 332 pp. \$65.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-19-925347-0.



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## Laying Explosives under Colonialism?

The companion volumes to the *Oxford History of the British Empire* (OHBE) were designed to “pursue themes that could not be covered adequately in the main series while incorporating recent research and providing fresh interpretations of significant topics,” so it is worth considering how far the current volume meets these criteria (p. v). Unlike other companions, notably Philippa Levine’s *Gender and Empire* (2004), this volume takes up a theme already given conspicuous attention in the OHBE; especially in volume 3, *The Nineteenth Century*.<sup>[1]</sup> One would expect nothing less of that volume’s editor, Andrew Porter, whose own interest in Christianity and empire prompted him to write two of the chapters in his own volume. One of these, “Religion, Missionary Enthusiasm, and Empire” provides an excellent overview of imperial Christianity; an overview expanded upon, but not freshly interpreted, in his essay for Norman Etherington’s companion. Surely there were alternatives to yet another chapter by a historian, however distinguished, whose views were already given such a thorough airing in his own OHBE volume. The ongoing marginalization of pioneering historian Brian Stanley seems particularly baffling.

Confusion deepens when we compare two claims made for *Missions and Empire*. On one hand, Etherington declares that missionaries were “remarkable for their absence in the first five volumes” of the OHBE; but, on the other hand, he promptly notes an “extended discussion” of them in Andrew Porter’s volume (p.1), as well as his own chapter on mission historiography written for the fifth volume.<sup>[2]</sup> There is no reason not to produce a companion on a theme already addressed by the main series, but surely there could have been more of an effort made to enlarge the circle of contributors.

The organizing principles of *Missions and Empire* are a much better reflection of the volume’s aims. Instead of chronological or geographical divisions, Etherington has used thematic chapters to encourage comparison and contrast. The results are remarkably fruitful and give the volume a welcome coherence, although it should be noted that the process of compilation took place amid generousities unknown to most editors. After an initial symposium funded by the Australian Academy of the Social Sciences and the University of Western Australia, a second gathering was held at the Basel Mission House

thanks to funding from Oxford University Press and the University of Basel. An article outlining the contributors' papers was published by Etherington with David Maxwell in 2004.[3] Given these repeated opportunities for reflection and collaboration, coherence is perhaps only to be expected. The themes of indigenous evangelists, language, gender, ethnicity, and the relationship between missions and government guided most of the contributions.

The fundamental issue of indigenous agency, so widely ignored by first-generation postcolonial discourse analysis, is given the nuanced treatment it deserves by Peggy Brock's piece "New Christians as Evangelists" and Paul Landau's essay on "Language." Both take a comparative approach that allows them to explore processes of mutual identity formation and appropriation on a broad canvas, locating these in the inevitable context of unequal power relations while avoiding the trap of power reductionism. A disappointing essay by Gareth Griffiths, however, seems mired in traditional postcolonial binaries of oppressor/oppressed and coloniser/colonized, despite his note that the archives actually support a more nuanced reading.

Even more disappointing is the treatment of gender or, rather, its lack of treatment. Griffiths discusses missionary women, but mainly to use their sex to locate them on the "colonized" side of the imperial binary. Likewise the chapter by Patricia Grimshaw and Peter Sherlock deals with women, not gender, and relives past battles about the neglect of women in history and the marginalization of feminist scholarship. Such claims seem startlingly out of touch: the works of Antoinette Burton, Catherine Hall, Philippa Levine, and Kathleen Wilson have gained establishment status in the "new imperial history." [4] Grimshaw and Sherlock seem largely unaware of the work of these prominent historians. Given the opportunities for repeated consultation among the various contributors, this angry isolationism seems bizarre. We must continue to wait, therefore, for substantial work on missionaries and gender, especially on missionaries and masculinity.

A discussion of race begins in the very first chapter with Eliga H. Gould's "Prelude: The Christianizing of British America." He notes an immediate ambivalence in missions to blacks: if slavery was unlawful for Christians, why proselytize among slaves? Patrick Harries tackles missionary contributions to anthropology, but in a general overview, rather than in an essay honed on the themes of ethnicity and race. John Barker's chapter,

provocatively titled "Where the Missionary Frontier Ran Ahead of Empire," is one of several to include the usually-neglected Pacific mission field. He notes the use of one ethnic or racial group in ministry to another, as among Polynesians when Tahitians or Samoan teachers went to other Polynesian island groups, or when Polynesians of various sorts formed missions to the Melanesian western Pacific islands.

Etherington himself provides a wide-ranging view of the relationship between missions, education, and medicine. Given the neglect of education and medicine along with most cultural dimensions in the original *OHBE*, this essay suggests provocatively that "Missions figure prominently as pioneers of modern welfare states and international Philanthropy," a line of argument which throws down the gauntlet before the standard analysis of such institutions as nothing more than manifestations of western power (p. 261). Two particularly wide-ranging chapters, Alan Lester's on "Humanitarians and White Settlers in the Nineteenth Century" and Robert Eric Frykenberg's on "Christian Missions and the Raj," cover a number of the volume's themes, demonstrating the importance of lateral thinking in the historiography of missions. Conceptions of race and strategies of governance are yoked together in a feedback process which is rarely straightforward, and sometimes generates the means of its own critique.

Etherington's introduction tells us that the contributors decided "to concentrate attention on all regions that at one time or another belonged to, or might well have become part of, the formal Empire" (p. 5). Such decisions about focus have to be made, and they are never enviable. Nevertheless, "formal Empire" is a strangely narrow definition of British colonialism, especially if the goal of the volume was to engage with the broad themes of mission activity. Robert Edgar's chapter on "New Religious Movements" straddles the colonial and independence periods, underlining how significant British influences remained, despite the end of "formal Empire." Now that we understand so much more about the scope of colonialism, surely categories like "formal Empire" would seem increasingly unhelpful.

It is important to end on a positive note, especially with reference to the contributors' endorsement of the belief "that the religious convictions of peoples around the world who accepted Christianity in all its myriad forms must be taken as seriously as the faith of the European Middle Ages or the American Puritans" (p. vii). Although some recent work on missions has begun to re-

discover this approach, many historians still prefer to impose their own secular ontology on historical Christianity, reducing it down to a function of power. The problem with this is that missionary Christianity was born under imperial rule, not in collaboration with it. There is no question (pace Andrew Porter) that there is a relationship between western colonialism and Christianity, but historical Christianity cannot be confined to modern, western structures. David Maxwell quotes Wesleyan preacher Ndabini Sithole's recollection that when "Europeans took our country, we fought them with out spears, but they defeated us because they had better weapons. But lo! The missionary came in time and laid explosives under colonialism. The Bible is now doing what we could not do with our spears" (p. 303). Western academics are only beginning getting to grips with the implications of such views, and this provocative volume should spur them on.

#### Notes

[1]. See Andrew Porter, "Trusteeship, Anti-Slavery, and Humanitarianism" and "Religion, Missionary Enthu-

siasm, and Empire" in *The Nineteenth Century*, ed. Andrew Porter, vol. 3 of *The Oxford History of the British Empire* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 198-246.

[2]. Norman Etherington, "Missions and Empire" in *Historiography*, ed. Robin W. Winks, vol. 5 of *The Oxford History of the British Empire* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 303-314.

[3]. Norman Etherington with David Maxwell, "Missions and Empire," *Journal of Religion in Africa* 34, no. 1-2 (2004): 194-99.

[4]. For example Antoinette Burton, *Burdens of History: British Feminists, Indian Women, and Imperial Culture, 1865-1915* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1994); Catherine Hall, *Civilising Subjects: Metropole and Colony in the English Imagination 1830-1867* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002); Philippa Levine, ed. *Gender and Empire*, Oxford History of the British Empire Companion Series (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004); and Kathleen Wilson, *The Island Race: Englishness, Empire and Gender in the Eighteenth Century* (London: Routledge, 2003).

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