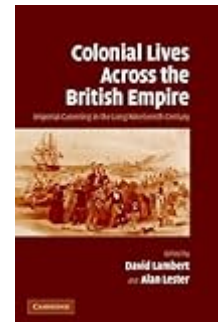


David Lambert, Alan Lester, eds. *Colonial Lives across the British Empire: Imperial Careerings in the Long Nineteenth Century*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006. xi + 376 pp. \$99.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-521-84770-4.



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As the publisher's blurb has it: "This volume uses a series of portraits of 'imperial lives' in order to rethink the history of the British Empire from the late eighteenth to the early twentieth centuries. It tells the stories of men and women who dwelt for extended periods in one colonial space before moving on to dwell in others, developing 'imperial careers.' " More ambitiously the blurb then claims that "Together their stories help us to re-imagine the geographies of the British Empire and to destabilize the categories of metropole and colony."

The editors bring together an impressively interdisciplinary and international field of contributors of individual chapters. The editors themselves are both geographers at British universities, though with research interests ranging from the Atlantic to South Africa. They are joined by geographers Philip Howell and Nicola Thomas, both at British universities, but also by literary scholars Leigh Dale and Anna Johnston, both from Australian universities, by historians Laurence Brown, Catherine Hall, and Zoë Laidlaw from British universities, and by Matthew Brown, Jonathan Hyslop, and Anita Rupprecht from interdisciplinary university departments in Britain and South Africa. The presence among the contributors of Val McLeish, an independent scholar without formal institutional attachment, and the large number of women contributors and contributors from out-

side Britain reinforces the book's message that the study of empire cannot be reduced to the study of insiders, officials, and metropolitans, though of course the editors make no claim to be revolutionary in this. More importantly, the small number of traditional historians amongst the authors supports the book's claim to challenge traditional historical categories of empire.

I read the individual chapters which make up the bulk of the book with real pleasure and interest. In too much writing on empire, the cultural turn can take the reader down culs-de-sac of obfuscation and bad grammar, where elaborate discursive buildings are erected on slight empirical foundations. By contrast, these essays are, apart from odd lapses, plainly written, they treat of important themes, and they bear evidence of meticulous work in scattered archives, private and public, in the steps of their wandering subjects. The essays present a range of lives, many of which are not biographies in the normal sense of the word in that they do not treat all aspects or all stages of their subjects' lives. Rather they take a person who had direct experience of metropole and one or more colony and focus on how his or her vision of empire, home, and self changed with experience of those places.

I read all of the essays with interest and enjoyment, but I did not find myself having to adjust many of my

ideas in reading them. The abundance of footnotes to Anita Rupprecht's chapter on Mary Seacole show how well worked her life and works have recently become, and I did not feel that I knew more about Seacole after having read this chapter, though its final paragraphs, which warn against the cultivation of a consensual version of her life that underplays her struggles, are pertinent and salutary (p. 203). Nicola Thomas's essay on the vicereine of India Mary Curzon and Val McLeish's on Lady Aberdeen, wife of the governor general, seemed not so much to break new ground than to extend elegantly into the imperial sphere the ideas in Kim Reynold's *Aristocratic Women and Political Society in Victorian Britain* (1998). Jonathan Hyslop's sympathetic and engaging chapter on the Scottish emigrant abroad seemed not visionary, but a fine example of John Mackenzie's thesis that imperial experience enabled Scots to assert their distinctive character vis-à-vis the English. His depiction of the importance of the home culture in a foreign land was carefully drawn but familiar to anyone who has worked on migrant cultures. Matthew Brown's essay on the adventurer Gregor MacGregor was entertaining because of MacGregor's sheer brazenness as he racketed around the globe, but was less informative than Frank Dawson's pithy *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* article (which also has a much better portrait, the one included by Brown not being from the life and having few artistic merits).

Perhaps as a geographer I do not need to be persuaded that things happen differently because they happen in different places, and perhaps as someone who worked for ten years on the *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* I do not need to be persuaded that collective biography is an effective way of telling nuanced history. But I do not flatter myself that I am particularly unusual, and would imagine that many readers would find the chapters similarly interesting but not necessarily challenging.

This in some senses does not matter at all. To have edited such a collection of scholarly, well-chosen, and very professionally produced essays is cause for congratulation, and the book is certainly more than the sum of its parts in that having the essays juxtaposed, rather than scattered in different journals, reinforces ideas of the diversity of imperial experience and the changes such experience demanded in views of self and other. The uniform presentation (each essay has a portrait of its subject and a map, mostly of uniform scale and projection) also aids comparison. The success of this scholarly collection is important when such edited works are under threat in Britain because they often count for little in university

research assessment exercises in which the journal article often reigns supreme. But do the essays together live up to the editors' ambitious claim that they challenge traditional notions of metropole and colony?

Before any discussion of their success, it is right to congratulate the editors on their high ambition. It would have been very easy simply to introduce the essays with a brief and incontrovertible statement pointing to the diversity of imperial experiences, in much the same way in fact as the book ends. The final chapter is, tellingly, not a conclusion but an epilogue in which Catherine Hall fulfills the function of a normal editor in drawing together common strands from the various chapters, before ending with the simple statement, "The lives of men and women such as the ones described in this collection remind us of the complexities of thinking about race and empire, the shifts over time that take place both for individuals and in collective discourses, and the profound debates that these issues engendered then and now" (p. 359). The editors in their introduction go much further. They question the traditional analytical concepts of metropole and colony, and identify the study of "imperial careering" as a method of breaking down these concepts.

To consider the second first. I doubt we need the expression "imperial careering." This is in part for the frivolous reason that "careering" kept bringing to my mind inappropriate Trollopian visions of the adventuress Mrs Hurtle, which threatened to disturb the rational reflection of Harriet Martineau, and the elegance of Lady Curzon (despite their common American origin), though perhaps it found a reflection in the breathless pace of life set by Lady Aberdeen. More seriously the idea of imperial careering seems infinitely malleable if it encompasses Curzon or the Aberdeenshire poet Charles Murray, who had knowledge of just one part of empire, and particularly Martineau who stayed at home and every now and then wrote about empire. Hall claims that her essay shows how Martineau "could career across the empire in her mind" (p. 344). This stretches the idea of "imperial careering" beyond its limits as the idea adds nothing to our understanding of either Martineau or empire. But the editors' more fundamental point that collective biography can be an effective tool of analysis I found fully persuasive. The lives collected here successfully show how stereotypes of empire, as well indeed as of gender, nationality, race, class and just about everything else, must adapt when confronted with the reality of life. This is evident on a much larger scale in the *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* whose richness derives from just this refusal of its subjects to conform to stereotype. Collective

biography, without needing notions of “imperial career-ing,” also helps us avoid slips where empire becomes its own explanation (such as in the quotation on p. 13 where empires are busy reshaping frontiers). It cannot, though, suffice for enquiry into the traditional concerns of imperial history such as political and administrative structures and economic relationships, and the editors themselves consider collective biography useful but not necessary to their approach (p. 31)

It remains to consider the editors’ first and more important claim: that the traditional analytical concepts of metropole and colony obfuscate links amongst colonies, exaggerate the capacity for autonomous and decisive action by metropolitans, and fail to recognize the varied conditions obtaining in particular colonial places. Sticking rigidly to the concepts of metropole and colony prevents not only a rich understanding of empire, but also fruitful exchange between traditional imperial historians and those interested in cultural aspects of empire, approached and theorized by other disciplines. What the editors proposed instead is to conceptualize empire as a web, with strands in the web spun by people (and texts) as they move about it, negotiating their careers in distinct places, reconciling their private and public lives, making and being made by the particular demands of each place whilst retaining a vision of empire (and other things such as protestant Christianity) which transcend the local and inform reaction to it. We arrive at what the editors describe as not a unitary “lens” or “prism” through which we can view imperial experience, but a kaleidoscope where fragments come together to form a coherent whole only to be disturbed before recombining again into a new settlement. (This is not altogether a happy metaphor as a kaleidoscope image has multiple rotational symmetries such that its “colonies” on the circumference are identical to one another and stand in identical relation to the “metropole” at the axis of rotation, all of which is at odds with the editors’ thesis.) This metaphor aside, the editors’ challenge is thought-provoking and deserves careful consideration. Their idea is linked, as the notes to their introduction show, to wider attempts to break down both binary conceptions of empire and disciplinary boundaries in the way in which empire is studied, and it is an important contribution to that process.

The editors’ ambitious aims are worked out effectively in their own essay on William Shrewsbury, Wesleyan missionary in the West Indies and Cape Colony. They convincingly show that Shrewsbury’s apparently contradictory views of people of African origin are readily reconcilable if one examines the particular conjunc-

tion of circumstances in each of his colonial homes. The essay shows the variety of colonial experience, but also of metropolitan views, since humanitarianism and, sometimes, a message of universal salvation, might be at odds with rhetoric of white settlement and colonial subjection. But several of the other chapters do not fit quite so neatly into the editors’ thesis, and ironically Catherine Hall’s epilogue perhaps fits least well. She has earlier used the categories of metropole and colony to good effect in her *Civilising Subjects: Metropole and Colony in the English Imagination, 1830-1867* (2002). In this collection Hall makes the useful, though not new points, that empire was an inescapable fact of daily life for those in the metropole, and that empire was imagined by people who had not experienced it directly. One such was Harriet Martineau, some of whose tales of political economy were set in the empire and dealt with imperial themes, though, with the exception of Ireland, Martineau had never visited the places she wrote about. The tales are described with Hall’s normal perspicacity, but she admits that Martineau’s “picture of the empire was one that flowed unproblematically from the centre to the peripheries: from England to the Cape, from England to Ireland, from England to Demerara, from England to Ceylon, from England to Van Diemen’s Land—these were the spokes of the wheel, moving out from the heartlands. There were no webs for her connecting one site to another” (pp. 357-358). This does not help us to destabilize categories of metropole and colony, as the editors suggest is desirable, but rather suggests that a vision of empire as a series of places connected with each other as much as with the metropole was confined to those with first-hand experience of it, and that the mass of the population was much more likely to retain the conceptions of metropole and colony which the editors invite us to discard. People encountered the dichotomy not just in Martineau’s tales, but in countless novels and newspaper articles, and, not least, imbibed it from childhood in juvenile literature and school textbooks. (An interesting exception might be British educational wallmaps which hung in so many nineteenth- and early twentieth-century schoolrooms. On them, even with the help of the Mercator map projection, Britain looks remarkably small compared with the other bits of red imperial territory, and networks of coaling stations and shipping routes present an image of maritime interconnectedness, not dichotomous metropole and colony.) But these maps aside, Hall’s argument that empire was imagined by more people than it was experienced, and that these imaginings often polarized metropole and colony, does undermine the editors’ case, as do studies of popular culture,

which John Mackenzie and others have shown to be so important in shaping imperial imaginations and which thrived on stereotypes of the sort the editors invite us to discard.

Moreover the other chapters do not unequivocally support the editors' thesis. Jonathan Hyslop's engaging chapter on Charles Murray in South Africa, and Nicola Thomas's interesting essay on Mary Curzon appear to show just the rather simple connection between metropole and colony which the editors seek to break down: the maps of their life journeys show simple, two-way journeys from Britain to South Africa and India respectively (pp. 289 and 313), though the editors make the point that the journeys shown on these maps are not comprehensive (p. 27, n. 96). Thomas describes how Mary Curzon's American origin complicated her imperial position, but this links us to a place which is neither metropole nor colony, and, though Thomas does not comment on this, the chapter shows Curzon interested in foreign policy beyond the formal empire, in the Persian Gulf and Russia. Charles Murray's life also shows interests outside both metropole and colony, though Jonathan Hyslop does not draw this to our attention. Charles Murray emigrated to the Transvaal when it was outside the British Empire, and where he was an *uitlander* to the dominant Boer. His poetry incorporates words from the Scottish, as Hyslop emphasizes, but also from nonimperial languages: "outspan" from the Afrikaans (p. 322), and "sc[h]ottisches" from the German (p. 325). Rupprecht's chapter on Seacole is concerned with areas outside the empire (Panama and the Crimea) as much as within it, and with Britain during the Crimean War when European concerns competed with imperial concerns for attention. McLeish's chapter, whilst very skillfully identifying philanthropic and "civilizing" strategies which succeeded in one part of the empire but failed in another, also mentions in passing Lord and Lady Aberdeen's rapturous reception by Irish people outside both metropole and colony: the Irish of San Francisco and New York, where their reputation for sympathy to Ireland had preceded them. In Anna Johnston's account of missionary activity "the colonies" in fact encompass areas of formal empire (Australia), informal empire (Polynesia), and areas largely outside British influence such as Brazil and even Tartary.

These instances and others which could be drawn from other chapters point to a real difficulty with the new proposed conception of empire: nowhere are empire, metropole, colony, core, or periphery defined. The British Empire comes to stand for empire in general,

though in the essays we get glimpses of other empires (former French colonies in the Caribbean and Canada, a Dutch settler colony, Russian imperial ambitions, and perhaps most prominently the Spanish empire in the essay on Gregor MacGregor). These hint at something which an attempt to rethink the geography of empire should perhaps treat more explicitly, namely that we confront a world of empires, not empire. "Colony" in the book comes to stand for any places which are not obviously the British metropole, regardless of their formal political status. In part this recognizes both past conceptions of the world, for example that of British capitalists who sought a profit wherever conditions were ripe, and more recent insights into informal empire. But the formal structures of empire did make a difference, and it matters to lives lived there if the "colony" under discussion was part of formal empire, informal empire, truly independent, or part of someone else's empire. If we are being encouraged to rethink our categories we do need a clearer idea of what we are offered instead.

Perhaps anyway what is needed is not a rethinking of categories or the addition of connecting webs to our ideas of metropole and colony, but a recognition that globalization happened far longer ago than many who emphasize its current novelty admit. This process has begun with, for example, A. G. Hopkins's edited collection *Globalization in World History* (2002), and indeed the editors of the volume under discussion have already helped to formulate such a view. In 2005, for example, they participated in a conference sponsored by the University of Cambridge's Centre for Research in the Arts, Social Sciences and Humanities entitled, "Beyond Imperial Centre and Colonial Periphery: Reconnecting the Global and the Local." The salient categories here are not so much tools for analysis (metropole and colony), or discourses (imperial and subaltern), or mental constructs (home and away, self and other) but geographical scales (global and local). These latter differ from the rest in not being dichotomous, since one entails the other, and in being connected by regional and national scales.

Perhaps these categories would bear further investigation, and one fruitful way to promote this new perspective might be conversation between students of empire and students of migration. Until now they have had too little to say to each other, not least because the latter are dominated by connections between the United States and Europe which make their concerns seem largely separate from imperial debates, underpinned as they are by American assumptions of exceptionalism and Europeans' concerns with the diasporas of their own particular peo-

ple. The editors in their introduction report that migration studies abound (p. 1), but they do not refer to any specific ones, and the genre as a whole does not inform their discussion. Yet migration studies show time and again the connections between the global and the local: before deciding whether to leave and where to go potential migrants surveyed the global scene through the information of their local peers who had already left. In their new lands they recreated as much of their home life as they could, often outdoing those left at home, and the “home” that they recreated often had local and regional as well as national elements. They formed a diaspora which blurred formal political differences between places: the Irish throughout the world who greeted Lord and Lady Aberdeen are a classic example. The Scandinavians who became a desirable part of British efforts to people its dominion of Canada with solid, white, protestant settlers are another. This globalization is evidenced in the missionary activity which is treated in essays in this collection, and which is universally recognized as central to British imperial endeavors (see for example Norman Etherington, ed., *Mission and Empire*, Oxford History of the British Empire Companion Series (2005)). From the British metropole missionary societies divided the world not into metropole and colony, but peoples in need of protestant salvation and those already so saved. Peoples could shift between categories. One of the most interesting things I have read recently on mission activity is Hanna Hodacs’s *Converging World Views: The European Expansion and Early-Nineteenth-Century Anglo-Swedish Contacts* (2003). Hodacs shows how Swedes were initially dependent on British missionaries for evangelical leadership in a country whose established Lutheran church was criticized for promoting merely nominal Christianity, but later collaborated as equals with Britons in saving others

overseas, or even outdid them in zeal and tenacity.

The trouble, though, with emphasizing the uniqueness of each place and its characteristics, and of considering processes operating on many geographical scales is that one may drown in the resultant sea of detail. The analytical concepts which we are invited to discard or modify reappear as desirable ways through the morass. Moreover, scholars primarily concerned with imperial government and administration and to a lesser extent with the economics of empire will not readily be persuaded to abandon concepts of metropole and colony which underpinned the structures of government, the economic realities of life, the official mind. It is significant that the lives on which the editors test their ideas are largely those at the margins of official empire: government is represented, but in the persons of the wives of colonial officials. Missionary activity is represented but largely through people low down in the missionary hierarchy. Economic activity is represented but through employees rather than large-scale capitalists. Imperial historians will not be persuaded to abandon or modify concepts of metropole and colony because such concepts incompletely account for the lives of officials’ wives, adventurers, dialect poets, and traditional healers.

However, if the editors’ introduction does not completely persuade, this is unsurprising as it is more a call to action than a fully-worked-out thesis. It is a call to which the authors of the essays collected here have responded perceptively, and it deserves a considered response from those more generally concerned with empire. The volume as a whole will be read with pleasure and profit by many who, without finding its thesis wholly convincing, will be stimulated to think through their own conceptions of imperial geography.

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