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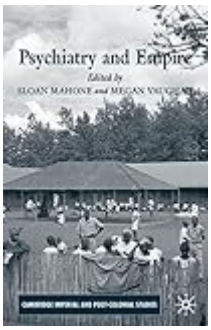

Sloan Mahone, Megan Vaughan. *Psychiatry and Empire.* Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007. 256 S. $69.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-4039-4711-6.

Reviewed by Pamela Dale

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S. Mahone u.a. (Hgg.): Psychiatry and Empire

At a time when it is increasingly difficult to find publishers for edited collections it seems unfortunate that there have been so many critical reviews of texts addressing various aspects of the history of psychiatry recently. There remains an incredible enthusiasm for the topic, fed by student as well as academic interest, but also concern about where the discipline is heading and what new insights can be developed before a major new methodology emerges. Against this backdrop it is possible to view âPsychiatry and Empireâ as an illustration of both the major strengths and weaknesses of the field today. The book includes ten chapters, each of which is impressive in its own right and which collectively add considerable nuance to our understanding of the colonial world as well as the practice and intellectual influence of psychiatry within it. Class, gender and race all emerge as important and interrelated themes that the individual authors handle with great sensitivity. While always alert to unequal power relations there is a collective rejection of the simplistic idea that colonial psychiatry was just about social control or a failed attempt at a great confinement. Instead psychiatry is shown to have served a variety of interests, with its influence felt outside as well as inside of the asylums. Yet there is also a cautionary tale from all the contributors about not accepting at face value the intellectual pretensions of leading practitioners or according them an unduly prominent role in wider colonial administration. Some actors used psychology and psychiatry to advance themselves and their ideas but there was also a culture of resistance among sceptical colonial administrators and local practitioners who drew on their own cultural traditions to offer a sophisticated critique of ideas and practices emanating from Europe.

The chapters, individually and collectively, deal with powerful themes and the writing is particularly fluent and persuasive. Yet, nothing here is entirely novel and there must be concern that many of the more subtle arguments advanced in âPsychiatry and Empireâ risk missing their target audience. This is because the collection is a difficult text for the general reader, while experts will no doubt concentrate on the larger studies that many of the chapters draw on. The collective endeavour which inspired the seminar series which led to the book project seems to have led to an unfortunate assumption that readers will have considerable prior knowledge of

the history and historiography of both colonialism and psychiatry over more than two centuries. The individual chapters introduce their topics, and their wider social, economic, and political contexts, with care but the very short introductory chapter could have done more to provide an explanatory framework and brief guide to the literature for the interested general reader.

It is also not completely unfair to suggest that the very vibrant dialogue between the introduction and the other chapters, and between the different contributors, has led to the surprisingly neglect of other work. I am particularly disappointed that there is no comment on the 2003 collection edited by Roy Porter and David Wright. Roy Porter; David Wright (eds.), The Confinement of the Insane. International Perspectives, 1800-1965, Cambridge 2003. This took an international rather than colonial perspective, but also usefully highlighted the problem of adapting policies and practices across national boundaries and different cultural contexts. The Porter/Wright volume is itself only one of a number of recent publications which have revealed the frustrated ambitions of professional psychiatrists, the many other actors determining the quality of available care, and the pressures of managing limited institutional resources. These issues resonate strongly with themes explored in âPsychiatry and Empireâ but the current volume makes little if any reference to such work, relying instead on an older generation of texts for comment on metropolitan developments. I think this is an opportunity missed, but hopefully something that will be addressed as scholars working on metropolitan as well as colonial psychiatry respond to this collection. There is certainly scope to draw together ideas about the mentally normal and the abnormal in colonial contexts with Mathew Thomsonâs recent work on Britain. Mathew Thomson, Psychological Subjects. Identity, Culture and Health in Twentieth Century Britain, Oxford 2006. In particular, the similarity between contemporary discussion of colonial madness and mental deficiency in the United Kingdom is as striking as it was clearly deliberate. This collection was however never intended to be the final word on empire or psychiatry, instead it should, as the editors clearly planned, encourage further work in these and other related areas. The collection is a very useful starting point, and each chapter merits close attention.

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