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Edwardian Ladies and Imperial Power

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This important book explores organise female imperialism in Edwardian Britain. Its significance lies firstly in the quantity of new research which it presents, which should make it of lasting value for future scholars of women's and gender history, modern British history and the history of imperialism; secondly, in the fresh insights it offers into ongoing scholarly debates concerning the nature of the Victorian and Edwardian women's movement, the impact of Empire on British society and culture, the range of European women's engagements with imperialism, and the part played by women of the upper middle class and aristocracy in politics and public life. These new insights, however, are perhaps rather downplayed by the author herself in her introductory chapter, and are not drawn together at the end of the book. Part of the aim of this review, then, it to try to draw out the significance and originality of the study through summarising its findings and relating these to previous work in the field.

While Bush's work is clearly informed by feminist scholarship and by post-colonial critiques of traditional Imperial History, this is very much an empirically-based study rather than a highly theorised or polemical work. It is perhaps the stronger for this: the concentration on historical specificity and deep contextualisation is intended to get behind the generalisations of some post-colonial theorising about imperialism, and thus advance debates rather than simply fitting new material into a pre-established framework.

It is interesting to compare Bush's study to the previous major study of Victorian and Edwardian women's engagements with Empire, Antoinette Burton's *Burdens of History* (1994). Bush's women are from higher on the social scale than Burton middle-class liberals: the upper middle class and aristocratic ladies who moved in what Leonore Davidoff has called 'the best of circles'. While Burton's group wished to reform Empire among feminist lines, Bush's promoted a womanly imperialism intended to complement and support the actions and propaganda of the masculine imperial elite. The prime concern of these - often politically Conservative and High Church - Edwardian ladies was with settlers of British stock in the emerging Dominions, not with Indian women, the focus of imperial campaigning by Liberal feminists. Burton's women claimed a place for themselves in the British body politic through their role as social reformers of Empire; in contrast, Bush's female imperialists were content to continue female aristocratic traditions of exerting informal influence on powerful men rather than seeking direct political power for themselves.

In her introductory chapter, Bush sets the context for the emergence of female imperialist organisations in Edwardian Britain. First, while much Edwardian imperialist propaganda was 'unselfconsciously masculinist', as revealed in John MacKenzie's pioneering studies, it offered women an important symbolic role as mothers of Empire. Secondly, leading imperialists of the period were increasingly turning their attention away from military conquest - the province of men - towards building a settled, civilising Empire - a project to which women were seen as vital. These two factors provided an opening for women's imperialist organisations promoting women's gender-specific contributions to Empire-building not only through propaganda and behind-the-scenes political lobbying but also through a range of practical work which included guiding female emigration and settlement, supporting church-building and missionary work abroad, providing juvenile imperialist education, and offering hospitality for colonial visitors to the mother country.

Bush's study focuses on four organisations, which, she argues, constituted an imperialist women's movement. As she points out, during the period there were many other imperialist organisations with substantial female memberships, but in these the policy-making leaderships were exclusively male. In addition, it can be argued that the majority of women's associations of the period had some form of ideological and organisational commitment to empire. However, those she selects, though varied in their origins, had by the Edwardian period emerged as a distinct and influential group yoked together by a common leadership drawn from High Society ladies with close links to the male governing elite. These women controlled highly centralised and hierarchical organisations, which fostered both a shared imperial outlook and practical day-to-day co-operation. Of the four organisations Bush selects, two were mass membership organisations, the Girls' Friendly Society (f. 1875) and the Primrose League (f. 1885, with its Ladies' Grand Council f. 1900s), and two were smaller groups, the British Women's Emigration Association (f. 1888) and the Victoria League (f. 1901) The three older organisations moved from their varied origins in the late Victorian period into a focus on female imperialism, a focus which embodied by the Victoria League from its inception. The League, described by Bush as representing the apex of female imperialism's social prestige, drew together leading ladies from the executives of all the older associations and aimed specifically to promote imperialism and strengthen connections between different parts of the Empire.

In studying these imperialist ladies' associations, Bush draws on both the publications and official records of the organisations and the extensive personal records - autobiographies, journals and letters - of their leaders. This is not, however, an organisational study in any conventional sense. Rather than considering the organisations separately, Bush studies them together. In addition, her focus is on their London-based leadership elite, not on the ordinary membership. As she acknowledges, her study thus does not displace the scholarly studies of the individual organisations made in the 1970s and 1980s by Brian Harrison, Martin Pugh and James Hammerton. Rather it provides a new lens through which to view their accounts, refracted through broader recent feminist scholarship of women and imperialism, and aiming to explore the themes which bound the organisations together and thus establish a 'paradigm of female imperialist ideas, methods and achievements' while at the same time remaining sensitive to contrasts and variety.

Bush approaches her source material sensitively. Given that female imperialists tended to leave the production of grand general statements about Empire to male imperialists, she opts to build up a picture of women's imperial ideas and vision of women's contribution to empire through exploring their organisational practices and activities. In the first half of her book Bush provides a picture of the social worlds in which the leading female imperialists were rooted and explores the impetus behind their personal engagement with empire. She moves on to look at the turn of the associations towards an imperial focus, to explore patterns of organisation and to provide a general overview of women's work for empire. In the second half of the book she explores select aspects of their work and outlook in more detail, examining their relationships with women's organisations in the Dominions, their racial attitudes, and their involvements in education and emigration. Finally, she places their activities in relationship with the Edwardian women's movement and the suffrage campaign. A brief postscript provides an overview of the impact of the First World War on organise female imperialism, while useful appendices give information on the growth of female imperialism, on female imperialist networks and on the biographical details of 'leading ladies'.

Chapter 2 on 'Society Lifestyles' successfully gets inside the social worlds of the women, and in so doing adds to work by scholars such as Kim Reynolds and Pat Jalland on elite women and politics, and well as establishing the 'bedrock of social and political assumptions' underlying female imperialism. One of the interesting insights Bush offers is that the continuing dominance of positions of imperial power by men from the social elite provided opportunities for the exertion of long-established forms of aristocratic female political influence - this at a time when the power of such informal networking was coming under threat with the increasing professionalisation and democratisation of domestic politics. Perhaps herein lies one of the explanations why many imperialist ladies did not feel the need to support women's suffrage. Chapter 3 on 'The Imperial Turn' explores how these Edwardian ladies learnt to 'Think Imperially'. It begins by examining the key importance of active engagement by family members in Empire-building, an engagement which involved their wives in travel and residency in the Empire: when these women returned to London society they were valued as 'experts' by female imperial associations. Bush goes on to look at the turn to imperialism of the leading ladies' organisations which are the focus of her study, identifying the impact of the South African War of 1899-1902 as a pivotal factor - and incidentally providing fuel for those historians who argue for the deep impact of the War on British society at the period.

Chapter 4, entitled 'Organized Ladies' details the organisational practices of the ladies' associations, demonstrating how the leadership's deep respect for social hierarchy, combined with the desire to exert influence on men at the heart of imperial power, led to very London-centred organisations. At the same time, determination to maintain a distinctive voice for feminine imperialism led to caution about close collaboration with larger, better-funded male imperialist organisations. In maintaining this distinctiveness, links to female members of the royal family were crucial: in particular, Queen Victoria, commemorated as maternal ruler of Empire, was an inspirational figure for female imperialism. Chapter 5 characterises women's distinctive work for empire, with its emphasis on practicality, altruism and the promotion of Christianity and morality. Fund-raising was a key activity, used both to support missionary work, church building and subsidised emigration and as an activity in its own right, designed to promote the imperial cause to the British public. Direct production of propaganda, however, tended to be left to the men. In many ways, then, the associations can be seen as continuing the pattern of organised female philanthropy which Frank Prochaska has made a detailed study for the Victorian period - at a time, though, when middle-class women themselves were beginning to move from voluntary work into paid or elected posts in public service.

One key area of work was the fostering of co-operation with like-minded women overseas and the relationship between British female imperialists and white women settlers in the Dominions is considered in Chapter 6. The familial iconography of empire, which stressed ties not only of culture but also of blood, clearly had a deep resonance for both groups of women. Close personal and institutional ties were fostered through correspondence, hospitality to women visiting Britain from its colonies, and tours of the Empire by leading female imperialists. However, whereas Dominion women wanted a relationship of sisterhood to women in Britain, British women often saw themselves in a superior maternal role and often adopted a condescending attitude towards 'colonials'. In particular, British women tended to ignore the Empire's diversity and show little understanding or sympathy for colonial nationalisms or for women's role in the nation-building process which accompanied the shift to Dominion status. Recognition on both sides of the mutual benefits of co-operation in the practical work of emigration, education and hospitality thus went hand-in-hand with conflicts over control of organisational initiatives and networks, a pattern which Bush illustrates vividly through her account of Meriel Talbot's World Tour on behalf of the Victoria League. This is a strong chapter, which draws on and adds to recent work on women in settler societies and on international women's networks of the period.

If female imperialists were keen to develop links with white settler women they were reluctant to see indigenous women included in the organisations they helped to foster. This was a result of their views on race. In Chapter 7 Bush explores how female imperialists adopted and adapted the 'race thinking' of leading male imperialists. Their chosen work for Empire linked biological and cultural production, epitomised in the concept of 'imperious maternity'. Influenced by the eugenicist cause, they were concerned for emigrating 'the right sort of women' to populate the white settler colonies - to become mothers of the imperial race in 'Great Britain'. Her findings are interesting to place alongside those of Lucy Bland and others, who have explored feminist support for Social Darwinism and eugenics. The women were also concerned to spread the 'English way of life' through womanly care and education as a way both of fostering British racial solidarity and of controlling potentially threatening 'inferior' races

Chapter 8 on education discusses the organisation's educational work in Britain among both adults and children, stressing both its significance as part of a broader escalation of popular imperialism and its general lack of distinctive femininity and relatively limited impact in comparison to the larger, better-resourced and more influential male-led imperialist propaganda organisations of the period. Here Bush's interpretation is a little confusing: she does not really adequately explain why organisations which were concerned to maintain a specific feminine focus did not carry this through more fully into their educational work - which was presumably largely among women and children. Perhaps a fuller consideration of the relationship of the leadership to local groups and to the boarder constituency of membership might have clarified her argument. In addition, it is a pity that no attention is paid to the educational projects in colonial settings that the British women supported.

Chapter 9 focuses on organised emigration, described by Bush as 'one of the success stories of female imperialism'. In contrast to the secondary role of female organisations in the field of education and propaganda, the female emigration societies became respected for their specialist expertise both by the British government and by Dominion governments keen to attract women settlers. There was tension however, between female emigrants desire to send out gentile middle-class women and colonial demand for working-class domestic servants. Growing out of Victorian feminist and philanthropic roots, the British Women's Emigration Association retained the early desire to provide employment opportunities for middle-class women and vision of the colonies as an era of escape form the restrictions of life in Britain with but combined this with a new stress on women's racial and imperial duty as 'future nursing mothers of the English race to be'.

As Bush points out, Edwardian debates on female emigration were impacted on by current debates around female education and employment, family life and the Vote, and in Chapter 10 she goes on to directly tackle the relationship between female imperialism and the women's movement, and especially to the campaign for women's suffrage, which reached its height at this period. There has been a tendency among historians to equate uncritical support for Empire with an anti-suffrage position, and it is true that leading imperialists, both male and female, were prominent in the Anti-Suffrage League. But Bush points out that just as many female imperialists were actively pro-suffrage. In a thought-provoking discussion, she encourages us to meditate more critically about what we mean by 'women's movement' during the Victorian and Edwardian periods. Traditionally, this term has been applied to the liberal middle-class feminists who organised around questions of women's suffrage, married women's property rights, the sexual double standard, and improved educational and employment opportunities for women. Recent scholarship has widened the use of the term to encompass working-class women both in the suffrage movement and in what Gerry Holloway has usefully termed 'the Industrial Women's Movement'. What then of women's organisations such as the female imperialist associations discussed by Bush, which were not explicitly feminist in their objectives? Bush argues persuasively that they should be seen as part of a broad-based 'women's movement' encompassing all 'publicly active and gender-conscious women'. Most of the leadership were involved in other forms of 'women's work', often in co-operation with middle-class feminists: these included organised philanthropy, the settlement movement, social purity, temperance, education, local government, and the National Union of Women Workers. Can these female imperialists then be labeled feminists? Relating her work to studies which have stressed the historical diversity of feminism and explored the links between feminism and imperialism, Bush argues that 'imperial feminists' and 'female imperialists' are overlapping but not interchangeable categories. Most female imperialists were not 'feminist' because they did not challenge existing gender relations with their inequalities of power; however they shared with feminists a pride in female identity, support for autonomous female organisation and reliance on networks of female support.

Overall, I found this a fascinating and insightful book, and I would wholeheartedly recommend it to both scholars and more advanced students alike. There is a resurgence of interest, both academic and popular, in the study of the British Empire at present, and scholarship by feminist historians seems to be contributing some of the freshest new critical insights. Bush's chapters on relations between British-based women and women in the Dominions, and on the relationship of female imperialists to feminism and the women's movement are particularly strong. The decision to focus on the female leadership of the organisations provides the book with a coherent focus, though inevitably the specific nature and activities of the rather diverse organisations is somewhat obscured. I also think it is a pity that the impact of the leadership on the ordinary members of the mass organisations is under-investigated: this could have provided an interesting route into discussing working-class girls and women's relationship to imperialism. But perhaps that is another book.

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