

Into Africa: The Imperial Life of Margery Perham

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Once upon a time, as every schoolboy knew, the history of the British Empire was the history of great men. Clive, Rhodes, Cromer, Curzon, Lugard, Milner: the names of these imperial pro-consuls, military leaders and administrative visionaries tripped off the tongue as paragons of the civilising and adventurous spirit which drove the expansion of England over three centuries and painted the globe pink. Any number of adulatory biographies documented these and other purportedly exemplary lives before the political reckoning of decolonisation and the new intellectual terrain opened up by post-colonial theory forced a radical re-thinking of the entire imperial project. More recent historiography has recast such imperial heroes, if not exactly as villains, then as knowing participants in a system of racialised power relations which at best produced a self-serving paternalism and at worst perpetuated unspeakable acts of colonial violence.

The role of white women within these power relations has also come under critical scrutiny from historians, with wives, female missionaries, moral reformers and celebrated travellers viewed as complicit – albeit to varying degrees and in different ways – in the shoring up of British colonial rule. Women are certainly no longer marginalised in the history of empire; yet only a tiny handful – Flora Shaw and Gertrude Bell are the exceptions which spring most readily to mind – can be said to have had a direct hand in or influence over the business of imperial *governance*, as opposed to the more general production of colonial knowledge serving to justify and entrench white supremacy. This in itself is hardly surprising: women were excluded from the administrative mainstream of the Colonial Service until the 1940s, restricted to posts as nurses, educators and social workers, and nearly always found engaged in activities concerned with the welfare of ‘native’ women and children. The bureaucracy of empire was, then, founded on gender difference and a maternalist ideology which positioned white women ambiguously, as both insiders and outsiders.

It is at this highly charged intersection of gender, race and empire that we find Margery Perham (1895–1982), the subject of C. Brad Faught’s new biography. Towering authority on colonial Africa, pioneer of the subfield of imperial history, and central figure in the reform of British colonial administration in the mid-20th century, Perham was the subject of a special issue of the *Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History* in 1991 [\(1\)](#), but has only now received the full biographical treatment that her extraordinarily rich and consequential life indisputably deserves. Faught follows for the most part a conventional biographical format: he starts with Perham’s middle-class Edwardian childhood in the elegant Yorkshire town of Harrogate and follows her story through from student days at Oxford to her first thrilling African encounter in Somaliland in 1920; subsequent chapters track Perham’s career as she cultivated her academic reputation, policy influence and public profile as an expert Africanist, with only a brief diversion by way of a chapter detailing her long association with Frederick Lugard, the celebrated imperial governor whose own life Perham would write in two compendious volumes (in so doing contributing, ironically enough, to the great man version of imperial history).

Although Perham was a woman of many parts (as well as the above, she published two novels, threw herself into amateur theatricals and maintained a complex relationship with Christianity), three facets of Perham’s professional activities emerge especially prominently in Faught’s narrative: Perham the (Oxford) academic; Perham the policy advisor; and Perham the public intellectual. Faught does a good job of explaining Perham’s broader historical significance on each of these fronts whilst also capturing something of his subject’s lively personality, often through direct quotation from her many private writings.

Perham, as Faught reveals, did not hold any particular aspirations to a career in scholarship, although her obvious ability plus fortuitous circumstances (supportive parents and a scholarship to St Hugh’s, Oxford) set her on the path to academic success, her first-class History degree securing a lectureship in Sheffield, where Perham first taught the subject – imperial history – which she would make her own. Sheffield also indirectly propelled Perham towards Africa, for it was the nervous breakdown brought on by overwork and loneliness there which prompted her to seek a rest cure in Somaliland, staying in the home of her sister, Ethel, and her dashing husband, Harry Rayne, a District Commissioner and first of the many rugged men of empire whose acquaintance Perham would make during her many subsequent African tours.

It was by witnessing first-hand how colonial administration functioned (or failed to function) on the ground that Perham gradually crystallised her thinking on empire over the next two decades. Faught sees her as a high-minded liberal who believed emphatically in the virtues of British colonial rule in Africa, but only where the rulers genuinely governed in the interests of the indigenous population and placed the needs of Africans – for education, welfare and economic development – above the self-serving claims of white settlers. As she moved from Government House to Government House, and from British Africa to neighbouring French and Belgian territories, Perham drew lessons about good and bad forms of governance, and about the qualities which allowed one District Commissioner to inspire respect and authority amongst his colonial subjects, and another to invite contempt and even hatred.

These observations made in the field provided the basis for Perham’s emergence in the 1940s as an

influential voice within Whitehall, where ministers and officials were grappling with the problem of how best to preserve the legitimacy of Britain's colonial empire into the post-war world. As well as sitting on various government committees and forging a close working relationship with Arthur Creech Jones, Labour's Colonial Secretary between 1945 and 1950, Perham helped to form the minds of Britain's cadre of colonial administrators; her *Native Administration in Nigeria* (1937) became required reading for Colonial Service probationers, whilst Perham propounded her views on good governance in person to the hundreds of officers who passed through the Oxford Summer School on Colonial Administration or later attended the famous Devonshire Courses for the 'rising rockets' of the post-war Colonial Service.

Faught sees this policy role as Perham's 'defining identity', and the one for which she would be best remembered, but he does not neglect to discuss her public-facing activities, most notably the newspaper articles and broadcasts which she began to produce in the 1930s on African and general colonial themes. Over time, these confirmed Perham's status as a leading authority on imperial matters amongst the wider public, perhaps *the* leading authority when it came to Africa, as the invitation to deliver the BBC's prestigious Reith Lectures in 1961 (the first woman to do so, Faught omits to mention) on the subject of African nationalism would suggest.

Faught deals with these several dimensions of Perham's professional persona extremely efficiently, almost *too* efficiently in fact; he concludes his study of this fascinating, complicated woman who left more than 700 boxes of papers to the Bodleian Library in Oxford in barely 160 pages (excluding notes). This approach makes for an easily digestible text, but some readers may feel that what is gained in pace and accessibility is lost in terms of depth and subtlety of argument. A good example of this is in relation to gender. Faught notes throughout that Perham was operating in a masculine world, but he never really develops the analysis beyond this general observation. Perham's views on feminism are touched on only briefly; we learn that she was sceptical of the Women's Liberation 'of the 1960s' (he means 1970s), but Faught is silent on Perham's attitude towards earlier feminist struggles, including the campaign in the 1930s to open posts in the Colonial Administrative Service to both sexes. Faught also seems unaware of the Colonial Office's wartime experiment of posting Women Administrative Assistants (WAAs) to Africa to make up the shortfall in suitable male candidates, a scheme which remained in place after 1945. It would be interesting to know whether Perham held any views on the suitability of women for administrative work and what she thought of the WAAs, as well as her reflections more broadly on the curious position in which she found herself in the late 1930s: as a recognised expert and policy advisor on an arm of government – colonial administration – from which women were barred from participating.

In seeking to contextualise Perham's status as a woman in a man's world, Faught draws some passing comparisons with Gertrude Bell, the celebrated traveller who served as Oriental Secretary in Iraq after the First World War, but these feel rather superficial. A more illuminating comparator might have been the Persian scholar Nancy Lambton, who was temporarily employed in the British Legation in Tehran during the Second World War and went on to teach Persian to Foreign Office Arabists and to provide informal policy advice on Anglo-Iranian relations. Lambton experienced a similar paradox to Perham insofar as she trained diplomats and advised on a region of the world – the Middle East – to which it was believed inadvisable to post women (who had only been permanently admitted to the Diplomatic Service in 1946). More careful contextualisation of Perham's influence in government of this kind thus might have shed light on how exceptional individuals armed with highly-valued expertise could defy the institutionalised sexism which more widely held women back from exercising real power.

Biographers often dabble in amateur psychoanalysis of their subjects – particularly in relation to matters sexual – with varying degrees of success. Faught's suggestion that Perham's professional dedication was 'the redirection of a multifarious psycho-sexual drive into a complete devotion to Africa' (p. 100) is actually rather plausible in light of the evidence, but again, one would have liked a fuller account of this voluntary spinsterhood. Perham apparently fell in love several times, mostly with men who embodied the active heterosexual masculinity which was hegemonic in the Colonial Service; but these relationships were unrequited (Perham was probably a virgin), a fact which Faught attributes to her Victorian sexual morality, but one wonders whether there was more to it than this (one of the objects of her affection was her brother-in-

law, Harry Rayne). It would be interesting to know whether Perham was ever attracted to any African men; her later championing of Seretse Khama, the heir to the chieftainship of Bechuanaland (then a British mandated territory), following his marriage to the white Englishwoman, Ruth Williams, suggests that Perham had no difficulty with inter-racial relationships. But what were her views during her earlier African tours, at a time when ‘miscegenation’ was widely condemned?

Perham’s racial thinking more generally deserves greater consideration than Faught is able to pack into his slim volume. He notes that Perham always commented on human physiognomy – white as well as black – in her travel diaries, and describes her as a product of an era in which ‘all manner of science and pseudo-science spoke to the existence and supposed profound meaning of racial difference’ (p. 47). Yet the 1930s and 1940s was exactly the time when scientific racism was becoming increasingly discredited, at least in academic circles, and it would be formally (and famously) denounced by UNESCO in 1950. Where did Perham’s personal experiences of colonial Africa and Africans place her in relation to these shifts in the debate over race?

On a related theme, Faught portrays the mature Perham of the post-war years as suffering little if any existential angst over the end of Empire. Her Reith Lectures, entitled ‘The Colonial Reckoning’, are presented as a calm, carefully thought-through exercise in preparing the British public for the inevitable, with an argument essentially in line with Perham’s earlier progressive views on the need for colonial development and welfare as a step along the road to eventual self-government. Where, one might ask, is the post-colonial trauma in all of this? Perham grew up in a world imbued with the certainties of British imperial rule, one in which the black man existed in a state of tutelage under the white man. As she reached retirement age, the values underpinning Britain’s historic imperium had already embarked on their journey away from the central, celebrated place they once occupied in national life, towards a more marginal, liminal space in which they could be derided, mocked or both. As Bill Schwarz has recently shown, this process was deeply traumatic for many Britons; racialised memories of the colonial past were an ‘active, combustible element’ in domestic politics and culture, as evidenced by the high psychic charge accompanying debates over immigration and race relations, which culminated in the ‘Powellism’ of the late 1960s and early 1970s. [\(2\)](#)

Was it traumatic for Margery Perham? She watched her expertise in colonial administration fall steadily into obsolescence as the Union Jack was lowered across the African continent and as younger colleagues in the academy embraced the radical post-colonial critiques of Frantz Fanon and Edward Said. Did she feel left behind?

Into Africa is a well-researched and highly-readable study and it will be the first stop for any reader curious to learn more about one of the 20th century’s most significant voices on Empire. But, for the reasons suggested above, it is not the definitive biography of Margery Perham. Nor does it part company with the established conventions of imperial biography. In reconstructing his subject’s enchantment with Africa, Faught renders Margery Perham herself as a highly romantic figure, as the very cover of the book suggests: a lush African vista at sunset, Perham’s soulful face superimposed above.

Notes

1. Special issue of the *Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History* 19, 3 (1991), edited by Alison Smith and Mary Bull. [Back to \(1\)](#)
2. Bill Schwarz, *Memories of Empire, Vol.1: White Man’s World* (Oxford, 2011), p. 5. [Back to \(2\)](#)

Many thanks for the review. The author does not wish to respond.

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[1] <http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews/item/53687>