

Imperial Leather: Race, Gender, and Sexuality in the Colonial Contest. ANNE MCCLINTOCK. New York: Routledge 1995. Pp. xii, 450, illus. \$55.00 cloth, \$18.95 paper

This is a big book, in every sense of the word: big format, big ideas, big aim. Not surprisingly, it does not reach every Olympian target in its sights, but it hits enough to command respect. Explicitly feminist, anti-racist, and anti-capitalist, it is as much a political document as an academic study.

Indeed, in her chapter on white South Africans' stubbornly apolitical reception of *The Long Journey of Poppie Nongena* (1980), Anne McClintock questions the artificial boundaries between aesthetic forms and political action. At certain moments, *Imperial Leather* reads like a novel, while at others it is a 'sustained quarrel with the project of imperialism, the cult of domesticity, and the invention of industrial progress' (4). It is an angry book, certainly, but it is also inspired by a vision of liberation that will exclude no one – especially women. For McClintock, 'a proliferation of historically nuanced theories and strategies is called for, which may enable us to engage more effectively in the politics of affiliation' (396).

There is no question that McClintock considers history important to her political objectives, but is *Imperial Leather* a history book? The tongue-in-cheek title and the provocative cover (of nude white women, decadently lounging about a public bath, tended by shadowy black women) prepare the reader for a journey into the historical connections between imperialism, sexuality, and race. The author fulfils her promise by taking frequently familiar, occasionally unconventional, and, at times, circuitous routes across the terrain of post-colonial theory, psychoanalysis, feminism, and historical materialism. Straight-ahead empirical history this is not.

The travel metaphor is apt, since *Imperial Leather* repeatedly unfolds maps. As McClintock reminds us, cartographic representations of conquerable 'virgin' land were powerful fetishes of imperialism, at once documents of racial and capitalist mastery and, at the same time,

nervous concessions to the unknown ('beyond there be cannibals'): 'The colonial map vividly embodies the contradictions of colonial discourse. Map-making became the servant of colonial plunder, for the knowledge constituted by the map both preceded and legitimized the conquest of territory ... Yet the edges and blank spaces of colonial maps are typically marked with vivid reminders of the failure of knowledge and hence the tenuousness of possession' (27-8). McClintock upsets the cardinal points of imperialism by turning them upside down to explain how imperialism cannot be read as the 'discoverers' depicted it. Most importantly, she reads imperialism less as conquerors' power over the conquered than as a reciprocal relation that transformed the colonizers as profoundly as the colonized.

Although her literary training and penchant for cultural studies jargon (references to boundaries, thresholds, fetishes, and otherness abound) may leave some historians numb, she also covers familiar territory, particularly in her analyses of the Victorian cult of domesticity and its connections to empire-building. Based on, and departing from, Lee Davidoff's and Anna Davin's path-breaking work on imperialism and domesticity, she indulges in two chapters on Hannah Cullwick and Arthur Munby's extraordinarily well-documented secret marriage. Far from a simple case of a bourgeois male who exploited a debased, working-class female, this relationship inspires McClintock to 'question the binary verities of dominance and resistance' (141). Her analysis of the sado-masochistic 'slave' rituals the couple enacted provides a prop for her broader argument that 'domestic space [in England] became racialized [and] colonial space became domesticated' over the course of the nineteenth century (36). While I found her analysis of Munby and Cullwick's rituals, in which she characterizes the apparently passive Cullwick as a self-directed agent, to be convincing, her assertion that their relationship represented imperial-colonial relations in microcosm seems overdrawn. Throughout the book, McClintock asserts the agency of colonized peoples, but she produces little evidence on the matter until the last few chapters on late twentieth-century South African liberation struggles.

More compelling are McClintock's arguments about commodity racism. This is where the second most widely cited trope in the book comes in. You won't find 'Boer War' in the index, but you will find 'soap,' and 'Pears' Soap' in particular. 'The first step toward lightening THE WHITE MAN'S BURDEN is through teaching the virtues of cleanliness,' an 1899 advertisement for the product ran. 'PEARS' SOAP is a potent factor in brightening the dark corners of the earth as civilization advances' (32). McClintock masterfully dissects the image, one of

ninety-three illustrations in the book. English soap and its aggressive marketing in the late-nineteenth century was a potent symbol of 'scientific rationality and spiritual advance ... the lesson of imperial progress and capitalist civilization' (32). Perhaps the most egregious example of soap as a signifier of white imperial superiority is an undated Pears' advertisement, in which a white-aproned white boy poises over a black boy sitting in a washtub. In a second frame, only the boy's head and hair remain black, while the parts of his body previously submerged in water have come 'clean.' As McClintock sees it, 'the magical fetish of soap promises that the commodity can regenerate the Family of Man by washing from the skin the very stigma of racial and class degeneration' (214). Other examples of domesticated imperial images abound – biscuit tins featuring 'tea time in the jungle,' 'British Empire' breakfast bacon, and a trail of Bovril marking Lord Roberts's march across South Africa. But these spectacles of imperial conquest were commodified not only in consumables but in breathtaking Rider Hagger novels, English zoos and museums filled with exotic plunder, and elaborate public displays of the queen as empress over all.

Imperial Leather does not pretend to be a history of colonialism, but it does tout itself as 'psychoanalytically-informed history' (72). McClintock is hardly the first to attempt this task (one thinks of Peter Stern's work on the history of emotion, for instance). But her marriage of different disciplinary and methodological traditions is daring and sometimes dazzling. Reading the book is a little like inviting a terribly clever guest to dinner: while the main course is still warm, you are held spell-bound, but by the time dessert rolls around, you realize that you are not entirely convinced by every nuance in her arguments. And she does repeat herself frequently, a product, no doubt, of the book's origins as a series of articles. There is much more in this big book than can possibly be conveyed in the confines of a brief review, so readers are encouraged to dine at McClintock's sumptuous table to sample for themselves.

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