

*Imperial Leather: Race, Gender and Sexuality in the Colonial Contest.* By Anne McClintock (New York and London, Routledge: 1995. xi plus 449pp.).

The major theme of this absorbing book is concerned with the intersections of the categories of "race," social class, gender and sexuality within the imperial

relation. But it has important points to make about much else as well, moving from cross-dressing and the psychological and cultural convolutions of fetishism, through commodity racism and the politics of domestic service, cultural resistance and national identity, to questions concerning autobiography and oral history. In some respects it is a rather sprawling text, but its wide-ranging tendencies are largely held together by its thematic insistence on seeing class, gender and ethnicity as articulated historical experiences, even though the points of articulation were often manifested in ambiguous, contradictory and conflictual manners, and on examining the ways in which imperialism and racial ideology have informed white subjectivity and symbolic exchange in the heartlands of Empire.

It is, though, the relation between imperialism and gender which is most consistently explored. This is done not only in respect of the different ways in which men and women have experienced imperialism, but also through the differences in such experience between women in economically powerful nations and those in countries which remain colonized or which have been recolonized. Equally significant is the analysis of a feminized domesticity in the nineteenth century in conjunction with the project of imperial mastery. Her unravelling of the complex ways in which gender and imperialism have been continually intertwined over the past two centuries or so is perhaps McClintock's most distinctive achievement in this book.

My own sense of this derives from my reading the book as an extension and revision of work like that of Edward Said's, in that analytically it resituates the dynamics of gender within the contexts of imperialism, primarily but by no means exclusively through a focus on women, in ways previously elided or underplayed. In this respect, as well as through the use of psychoanalysis as a tool of historical analysis, it complements Graham Dawson's primary but by no means exclusive exploration of masculinities in relation to the British Empire in his recent book *Soldier Heroes*. It also moves beyond the simplistic binarisms of earlier anti-orientalist writings, and shows how the identities of gender, class and "race" interrelate and sustain each other in the maintenance or contestation of social power. McClintock's refocusing of the analysis of social power principally through the gender-imperial relation is an important achievement because of the many other issues it introduces in the careful and intricate development of this analysis.

For example, she shows how the cult of domesticity, the civilizing mission, the ideology of progress and an emergent culture of consumerist spectacle were all implicated in the ephemera of kitsch advertising in the late-Victorian period. Some of the material drawn on, such as the iconography of soap advertisements, Olive Schreiner's life and work, or the diaries of Arthur J. Munby and Hannah Cullick, have been critically examined in previous studies, but McClintock offers fresh points and new angles of interpretation, and of course brings other forms of evidence to bear on her major themes. What is especially striking in her historical use of, say, an artifact like the simple bar of soap, is the way she cogently demonstrates it as having at once brought imperialist ideology and evolutionary racism to the British domestic hearth, contributed to the disavowal of women's domestic labor under imperial capitalism, and, as an icon of racial hygiene, revealed "that fetishism, far from being a quintessentially African propensity, as

nineteenth-century anthropology maintained, was central to industrial modernity, inhabiting and mediating the uncertain threshold zones between domesticity and industry, metropolis and empire.” (p. 210) To summarize her analysis in this way does not do justice to its flair and inventiveness, which can only be appreciated first hand, for her work in this text in many ways exemplifies historical-cultural studies developing towards its full potential.

This is manifest not only in her case-work studies of the gender relations of domestic service and nationalist discourse, or in her readings of texts like *King Solomon's Mines* and the oral narrative of “Poppie Nongena,” but also in the ways her historical analysis leads her into critical engagement with the theoretical contributions of writers like Lacan, Fanon and Bhabha. She also effectively develops and utilizes her own concepts: those of *anachronistic space* and *panoptical time* are especially illuminating in their application to particular objects of analysis. Integral to the book's success are its ease of movement between specific cases and structural patterns, its weaving of heterogeneous cultural forms and genres into her general arguments and themes, and its smooth intermixing of historical story-telling and analysis.

There is, finally, one other feature of the book which I would like to commend. This is that it abundantly brings back home how imperial and anti-imperial narratives and discourses constitute a complex legacy that we are still living through, and that much contemporary work in cultural analysis and theory is historically forestalled. It is for this reason that McClintock seeks to offset what she describes, in the book's closing words, as “the prospect of being becalmed in a historically empty space in which our sole direction is found by gazing back spellbound at the epoch behind us, in a perpetual present marked only as ‘post,’” (p. 396) *Imperial Leather* does much to fill out that space and to break us out of the beguiling spell of a present-bound, “post”-obsessed gaze.