

With Smiles and With Soap

The British Empire as a concealed state of mind.

IMPERIAL LEATHER

*Race, Gender and Sexuality
in the Colonial Contest.*

By Anne McClintock.

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By Lewis D. Wurgaft

NOT so long ago, most historical accounts of British colonialism fell in line with the 19th-century historian John Seeley's maxim that the English had "conquered and peopled half the world in a fit of absence of mind." The Empire, that is, was founded and then functioned in relative neglect, remote from the calculations and concerns animating Victorian life. Anne McClintock's "Imperial Leather" takes a prominent place among a number of recent works, including Edward W. Said's "Culture and Imperialism," that question the relegation of the imperial enterprise to the back benches of the Victorian sensibility. "Imperialism," Ms. McClintock contends, "was not something that happened elsewhere — a disagreeable fact of history external to Western identity." Rather, the imperial enterprise and its implications were repressed or split off. In her reckoning, colonized peoples embodied the dark and contradictory underside of Victorianism that when not hidden away was visible only through an exotic iconography of degeneracy and debasement.

"Imperial Leather" places the racial politics of imperialism at the imaginative center of Victorian life. A complex, fluctuating set of cultural images both contained the society's economic and sexual contradictions and was used to justify patriarchal domination, Ms. McClintock says. This was managed, she argues, through the agency of the fetish, a concept that she teases out of its familiar contexts in primitive religion, Marxism and psychoanalysis and applies to the dynamics of gender and race. "Fetishes," she says, "involve the displacement of a host of social contradictions onto impassioned objects"; given that broad definition, Ms. McClintock, a professor of English at Columbia University, can use the term to present imperial ritual as a magical means of mastering the cultural and social ambiguities of Victorian society at home and abroad. And so, she argues, in Victorian Britain, the economy and sexuality "were arranged around the social idea of racial fetishism, displacing what the modern imagination could not incorporate onto the invented domain of the primitive."

But she goes farther: "Imperialism," she says, "returned to haunt the enterprise of modernity as its concealed but central logic." Not surprisingly, "Imperial Leather" falls short of substantiating this far-reaching contention. Described as "an attempt to intervene strategically in historical narratives of race and fetishism, domesticity and empire," it nevertheless lacks any broad discussion of economic or social history. Still, Ms. McClintock's astute reading of novels, diaries and advertisements, among other sources, demonstrates how images of domestic life can be incorporated into an ideology of imperial domination. This is most graphically shown in her treatment of late-19th-century advertising, in which mass-produced commodities were sold under the banner of imperial expansion as icons of progress and power.

In a richly illustrated section of the book, Ms. McClintock cites an advertisement for biscuits in which a group of male colonists is depicted taking

tea in the middle of the jungle; another displays three small African boys, including one whose skin is bleached white, all sailing in a soap box on some colonial sea under a sign reading, "We are going to use 'Chlorinal' and be like de white nigger." The marketing of soap, particularly, lent itself to the fetishistic cultivation of empire. In a society threatened by social agitation, global competition and anticolonial resistance, the bar of soap embodied a magical potency when portrayed against a colonial backdrop of darkness and degeneracy. In Ms. McClintock's terms, commodity fetishism and racial fetishism combined in a powerful image of domination.

These themes are also woven into her treatment of the diaries of Hannah Cullwick, a maid of all work, and Arthur Munby, a poet and barrister, whose sadomasochistic relationship subverted the conventional boundaries of class and gender in Victorian Britain. With the assistance of Munby's photographs, she presents their preoccupations as a synthesis of personal history and social history. The Victorian era's deeply ambiguous attitudes toward race and class relations, women and women's work, found expression, she says — and an attempt at playful mastery — in Cullwick and Mundy's sexual practices, from bondage to a reveling in dirt.

In pursuing her subject Ms. McClintock adopts a middle-of-the-road post-modernism. Her reading of the historical record is staunchly feminist, and she argues ably with a number of critics, including Mr. Said and Frantz Fanon, who, she feels, have failed to treat women and the images of women with the importance they deserve. Yet her treatment of the issue consistently takes into account other crucial historical variables like class and race. In the same spirit, she rejects what she sees as the rigidly binary thinking of Western historicism, which has tended to treat colonized and colonizer, female and male, as polar opposites. In asking how imperialism succeeds or fails, she insists that contemporary study of the colonial experience be "as deeply concerned with questions of violence and power as it is with questions of fantasy, desire and difference."

BUT for all Ms. McClintock's avowed uneasiness with post-modern scholasticism, theory is doled out with a heavy hand in "Imperial Leather," be it Marxist, psychoanalytic or deconstructive. As a consequence, her historical judgments tend to be apocalyptic. Contrasts and inconsistencies in the historical record are invariably rendered as contradictions, and her use of the term "fetish" is a complex case in point. Worked overtime, the term expends its expressive and explanatory power and begins to take on a ritualistic flavor of its own. The fetish object that gives the book its title is the leather "slave band" that Cullwick wore as a sign of her loving servitude. But "fetish" is also applied to such diverse things as treasure maps, toothpaste, national flowers and team sports.

Many sections of "Imperial Leather" have been published previously and are well known to scholars of colonialism. This may account for the frequent cross-referencing, backward and forward, that sometimes makes for disjointed reading. And several chapters — the ones primarily focused on 20th-century South Africa — are only loosely integrated into the book's theoretical apparatus. Among these, the essay on the South African feminist Olive Schreiner and Poppie Nongena, the unlettered Xhosa-speaking black woman on whose life Elsa Joubert's documentary novel is based, are intriguing reading. Like the earlier chapters on imperialism as an outlet for unresolved conflicts in the cities at home, they bring the issue of women to the foreground as a dynamic element in the colonial narrative. □

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