

Title—Congregational Missions & the Making of an Imperial Culture in Nineteenth-Century England

Author—Susan Thorne

Year—1999

Categories: Empire, Religion, Class

Place: Britain & British Empire

Time Period: 1790-1910

Argument Synopsis:

Susan Thorne focused on the missionary movement in the 19th century to demonstrate the influence of the empire on the metropole, arguing that working class people within Britain found dignity and meaning in relation to the empire. Her book is primarily concerned with the missionary movement, **both home and abroad**, and the ways missionary propaganda helped ordinary Britons imagine themselves in relation to the empire. The imaginative relationship to empire encouraged by these missions contributed to central developments in British history, including class formation, gender relations, rise/fall of British liberalism, and the role of organized religion.

The book claims that historians have not fully examined the role of the empire on the British public, in part due to the discrediting of imperialism in the immediate aftermath of decolonization. For various reasons, empire was not fully considered in terms of British history until the late 1980s/early 1990s. Thorne's work exists alongside other works emphasizing the importance of the empire.

Missionary texts were very popular, and the texts from home missions were often the primary source of information about the poor and laboring classes in Britain. She claims that reading missionary texts in relation to the local contexts in which they were disseminated is necessary in order to understand the hold imperialism held on British imagination. Thorne criticizes the tendency of historians to consider home and foreign missions as separate undertakings. Missions, both home and foreign, played a critical role in the formation of class and gender identities.

Thorne reveals how British Protestants did not show any interest in missions until the end of the eighteenth century, until a sudden expansion in the 1790s. Thorne demonstrates that missions emerged as an institutional medium through which developments in the foreign mission field influenced the British home front, particularly in terms of moving the emerging British middle class from the political margins to British society's cultural center.

Missions played a significant role in the shaping of **middle-class identity**, and Thorne underscores how missions also helped shape conceptions of femininity through their propaganda. She explores the gendered nature of foreign and home missions, and the gendered attributes of middle-class respectability that determined where women chose to participate in missionary movements. Thorne argues that evangelical women preferred foreign over domestic missionary involvement because of a central contradiction of evangelical femininity.

Key Themes and Concepts:

- The British Empire was not marginal to British culture, and missionary propaganda helped shape late Victorian society
- Organized religion, and missionary activities in particular, played a formative role in the formation of the British middle class