

Title—Empire and the Sun: Victorian Solar Eclipse Expeditions
Author—Alex Soojung-Kin Pang
Year—2002

Categories: Science & Technology, Empire, Politics

Place: Britain & the British Empire

Time: 1860-1900

Argument Synopsis:

Empire and the Sun: Victorian Solar Eclipse Expeditions studies eclipse expeditions in order to garner a better understanding of the organization and politics of Victorian science. Pang is interested in exploring the practice and experience of science in the Victorian era through the lens of solar eclipse expeditions. He is particularly concerned with the scientific visual representations of eclipses. He highlights the connections between **science and colonialism** during the Victorian period, arguing that the infrastructure of imperialism allowed for astrophysical fieldwork to be conducted. Pang underscores the relationship between science and empire and between science and visual representations. In particular, Pang is in conversation with the historiographies on science and technology studies (STS), visual representation and science, and science and empire.

For the purposes of his book, Pang is focused on expeditions sponsored by major scientific British societies, although he acknowledges the existence of amateur expeditions. Pang looks specifically at expeditions sponsored by the Royal Astronomical Society, the Royal Society of London, or the British Association for the Advancement of Science. The expeditions commissioned by British societies left copious amounts of documentation and fieldwork reports, which reveal the various connections between science and colonial culture during this period. There are some gaps in the research due to the overt focus on this official documentation, in particular the absence of women or indigenous voices. Although Pang notes there were women who participated in these expeditions, they do not feature in the sources. Pang chooses not to heavily engage with the presence and/or role of women and indigenous actors in the field, due to their absence in the sources.

The connection between science and empire was apparent to Victorian scientists in the period. Pang reveals how Victorian astronomers were dependent on the systems of imperialism, especially railroads and local labor. While technology evolved over this period, notably in terms of visual representations, the eclipse expeditions maintained a reliance of **imperial infrastructure** throughout the period. The evolution of tools helped solidify the professionalization of the participants, as the price became prohibitively expensive. Some astronomers at the time understood the unity of science and imperialism, and all Victorian astronomers heavily utilized the systems of imperialism. Pang notes that no Victorian astronomer wanted to escape the world of imperialism, and the infrastructure and opportunities it provided. Solar eclipse expeditions provide a useful case study to understand the close relationship of science and imperialism in mid to late nineteenth century Britain.

Key Themes and Concepts:

- Preference for field sites close to colonial railroads highlights importance of colonial infrastructure to the practice of Victorian science
- Concretization of Victorian science brought with it a professionalization of its practitioners