

Title—Gender and Empire
Author—Angela Woollacott
Year—2006

Categories: Gender, Empire, Colonialism, Historiography
Place: British Empire
Time: 1750-Present

Argument Synopsis:

Woollacott's book sets out to highlight the past two decades of the 'new' imperial history: a revisionist field of research disrupting the conservative project of British empire history. She asserts that through applying feminist, postcolonial, subaltern studies and critical race theory approaches, new imperial histories have radically reconfigured our understanding of the imperial project. According to Woollacott, this new direction in imperial history has helped decenter the imperial metropolis and assert in its place the constitutive capacities of colonial and colonized peoples, regimes, and cultures. She notes how transnational research, in particular, has produced a body of scholarship foregrounding the role of gender and the agency of colonized peoples in its analyses of the ideologies and materialities of empire. Her book seeks to provide a comprehensive overview of the new imperial history with a particular emphasis on valences of gender and race.

The scope of the book is very large, attempting to cover the whole of Britain's colonial period with a focus on gender. The book covers the period from the late eighteenth century through the late twentieth century, but she uses a thematic organization as opposed to chronological. She includes six chapters dealing with sexuality and race, masculinity, adventure and war, domestic worlds, conditions of labor (slave, convict, free, indentured), anti-colonialisms, and gender in the metropolis. The organization underscores the objectives and methodologies of the new imperial history. The wide scope allows Woollacott to convey the complex ways in which gender has been formative in the interrelated ideologies and materialities of imperial and colonial power relations. She is able to touch on women's involvement in Kenyan nationalism, convict women in Australia, and colonial women travelers in London in the early twentieth century, to name a few. Woollacott notes that there is still much work that needs to be done in colonized and indigenous histories of empire and gender. The history of the British Empire is still largely being told by the winners, or their descendants. She argues that without its dynamic positionality the new imperial scholarship risks reiterating the very kinds of imperial knowledge-power it seeks to unravel.

This is a survey book, so each chapter provides a brief introduction to the scholarly literature on the subject at hand, as well as case studies that illustrate the gendered nature of British imperialism. Woollacott reveals two important themes across the new imperial history. One being that understanding the culture and practices of colonialism requires an examination of the intersection between hierarchies of gender and hierarchies of race. The other being that the history of empire is best understood not as separate from, but inexorably linked to, the history of the metropole.

Key Themes and Concepts:

- The investigation of Britain as a product of empire may affect the re-inscription of metropolitan power
- Centrality of both masculine and feminine ideologies to the imperial project
- Gender has been formative in the interrelated ideologies and materialities of imperial and colonial power relations