
Deana Heath’s *Purifying the Empire* is largely based on British colonial history in the nineteenth century and is a comparative study of how a government project, started in the United Kingdom, was quickly transformed into an imperial venture. Heath shows how, through the process of globalisation, British ‘governmentality’ came to have a major impact on two specific colonies, namely Australia and India. ‘It was the desire to make certain kinds of citizens possible – both those capable of governing the nation and empire and those capable to being governed – that led to efforts to regulate the obscene in Britain’ (p.53).

By utilizing a rich variety of archival documents in the United Kingdom, Australia and India, Heath sets out to describe the measures that were initially adopted by the Imperial British Empire when they attempted to create policies and legislation that would in effect regulate, halt and ultimately put an end to the creation and distribution of obscene publications. She then illustrates how these policies were transferred to Australia and India and the reactions that these policies were met with in each colony. On the one hand they were adopted by Australia, significantly impacting her customs regulations and culture, and on the other hand, largely rejected by India, which also speaks for the colonial nationality that was developing there.

Her book begins with a brief explanation of the initial period of the British Empire and colonisation in which there were clear cut boundaries and differences between the homeland and the colonised state. She sees that these “spatial, cultural, moral” divisions created and in turn defined the “inner and ‘outer’, ‘self’ and ‘other’, and ‘home’ and ‘empire’” (p.1); in other words it was clear who was the coloniser and the colonised, the nation state and the empire. However, with the expansion of printed material in the nineteenth century and the consequential distribution of these books and periodicals, which often focussed on what were considered as the norms and cultural attributes of Europe, the boundaries between the Empire and the nation state began to disintegrate. This book illustrates how the Empire and her colonies were not governed as separate domains but rather there existed a ‘myriad of connections between the metropoles and their colonies’ (p.212).

Heath argues that print-culture was viewed as a tool for colonisation by Australian and Indian imperialists: publications often presented the Empire as morally superior, thus promoting British culture. Nevertheless this also meant that such potent moral-cultural capital was expected to reflect the ‘strength and purity’ of Britain, and must not be allowed to undermine the moral integrity of the empire. In this light, the rapid increase in publications that focussed on the obscene emerged as a significant problem. Whilst her chosen topic is quite narrow in its focus, Heath successfully describes the ways in which the British Empire tried to, and in some cases succeeded, control the direction of the colonial government and ensure that the policies introduced were beneficial to her.

Heath then plunges into her topic with a comprehensive discussion regarding how and why Britain implemented these laws and the ways in which they affected the publication and distribution of obscene printed material. The first two chapters describe the ways in which the British Government began it’s ‘biopolitical project, namely the drive to regulate the obscene
in the late nineteenth century Britain.’ (p.1) Chapters Four and Five go on to discuss how these regulations were applied to the colonies of Australia and India. Whilst her thorough research provides the reader an in-depth understanding of Britain’s stance against obscene publications, Heath devotes a large section of the book to describing the policies introduced within the United Kingdom. Sadly less time is spent illustrating how these impacted upon Australian and Indian colonies. However, she does go on to demonstrate to the reader the ways in which these laws affected British, Australian and Indian societies and how obscene publications impacted race, gender and class divisions in these three different parts of the world.

Heath has written an exceptional book on nineteenth century British colonial policy and the ways in which these came to impact policies in Australia and India and the governing of those nation states. However, her conclusion introduces many new avenues of argument which are left unexplored, and which might profitably have been developed further within the previous two chapters. Nevertheless, *Purifying the Empire* is a unique contribution to the historiography of British, Australian and Indian colonial history. Heath illustrates that by focussing on specific aspects of British Imperial governing, such as obscenity, it is possible to expose an extensive array of implications for the Empire and her colonies.

*Kerriann Shipster*

The University of Western Australia