GENERAL EDITOR'S INTRODUCTION

The notion of the gendered 'separation of the spheres' has become increasingly fragile of late. Several scholars have questioned its applicability in the nineteenth century where it formerly seemed to be most securely based. But if this concept of functional and occupational separation has been called in question in the domestic setting in Britain, it surely seemed to be the case that it remained valid in the British empire. Imperialism in non-settler territories appeared to create a distinctively masculine space for the dominant people. White women, usually in the minority among the expatriates, were separated and protected, maintained in a cultural cocoon (expressed in spatial and architectural terms) from which they were seldom permitted to fly free. This seemed to be particularly the case in the Indian Empire.

In this book, Mary Procida convincingly destroys this orthodoxy. She uses a remarkably wide and rich range of sources to demonstrate that women themselves saw their roles very differently and that these self-perceptions were invariably accepted within the masculine world. It is true that records, whether memoirs, autobiographies or interviews, were left by a distinctive sample, but such ideas seem to have been widespread in imperial society. Although the male authors of imperial literature may have given a different impression, it is, perhaps, possible to identify a set of counter-canonical attitudes in the fictional and non-fictional writings of the many women who wrote about India. In any case, empire may also have offered opportunities for professional women, particularly in the educational and medical aspects of missionary activity, which might not have been open to them at home.

Given my own background in studying hunting and the exploitation of animal resources in the empire, the sections of this book which demonstrate the extensive involvement of women in sports, including hunting and shooting, were of particular fascination to me. I had constructed hunting, with all its symbolic resonances of the domination of the environment and its creatures, as an essentially masculine activity. Of course, I had encountered female hunters, but they seemed to be those relatively rare members of the imperial upper classes who took on masculine characteristics as part of their social dominance. Mary Procida has demonstrated that we require a more nuanced approach to such activities. Women who in Britain participated in fox hunting and shooting (but seldom, if ever, stalking) seized the opportunities available to them in the empire. Their roles in the iconic domination of an exotic environment were also highly significant.

It may be that Procida's analytical conclusions can be extended to other parts of the so-called 'dependent' territories of the British empire and possibly to other European empires as well. What is clear is that no future scholar of the female participation in imperialism can ignore this book, replete as it is with highly original and stimulating insights.

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