

Welsh Missionaries and British Imperialism: The Empire of Clouds in North-east India

Review Number: 1960

Publish date: Thursday, 21 July, 2016

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Missionaries are no strangers to students and researchers of the British Empire. The hackneyed image of the rough-hewn Anglican vicar preaching salvation, Christ, and colonialism to legions of natives is one of the enduring archetypes of British colonialism. This image, like so many similar ones, is not without basis in historical fact. Missionaries played a notable role in British imperial expansion and colonial rule. Furthermore, missionaries often provided some of the staunchest advocacy for empire in Britain. In his monograph *Welsh Missionaries and British Imperialism: The Empire of the Clouds in North-east India* Andrew J. May states that missionaries should no longer be viewed simply as ‘cultural terrorists’ or ‘colonialism’s Trojan horse’ (p. 3). May sheds light on the neglected history of Welsh missionaries working out of the Cherrapunji hill station in northeast India, the ‘Empire of the Clouds’, in the mid-19th century. In short, May engages in a contextual deconstruction of any monolithic perceptions of colonial missionaries. The Welsh missionaries, May argues, did not march in lock-step with the military or other colonial forces. In this case, Welsh missionaries eventually fell victim to other imperial pursuits.

The author explores and analyzes the Welsh missionary interactions with the natives of a region dominated neither by Hinduism nor Islam. This region, in short, provided a very unique challenge for the Welsh missionaries: how did one preach when there was no distinctive major religion to rally against? May admirably fills the gap in academic literature concerning Welsh mission efforts and the colonial history of northeast India, successfully providing answers and unearthing new questions. Underpinning the analysis is the biographical narrative of Thomas Jones, Welsh missionary and distant ancestor of the author. Through the combination of thick description and biographical narrative, May crafts an intricate micro-history that yields larger conclusions about Welsh roles in British India, geographical space, power, sex, relationships, morality, and cultural interactions during the mid-19th century. Through this work May carves a niche in the historiographical record, building off other methodologies, and drawing new conclusions about colonial experience in India.

May builds his work, at least partially, on the historiographical shoulders of Dane Kennedy, Pamela Kanwar, and Catherine Hall. Kennedy argued in his monograph *The Magic Mountains: Hill Stations and the British Raj* that mountains provided the British with a refuge – symbolically, medically, geographically – from the hot and hostile plains. The British quickly began to construct hill stations as retreats from the hot climate. Furthermore, Kennedy chronicled the British relationship with Indians indigenous to the mountains. Kennedy wrote that colonizers ‘stressed the moral innocence of the noble savage, the rustic simplicity of the pastoral life’.⁽¹⁾ Colonizing Britons inevitably found themselves grappling to conceptualize Indians in the mountains all the while trying to escape those Indians on the plains. No matter how hard they tried, colonizers could never fully escape Indians. May builds on Kennedy’s explorations of the spatial-geographic importance of the stations, but also how missionary interactions with natives differed. After all, missionaries sought to engage Indians whereas other members of the colonizing class attempted to avoid them.

Pamela Kanwar illustrated in her work *Imperial Simla: The Political Culture of the Raj* how British colonial officials replicated England at the Simla hill station. Simla proved so popular that it served as the Raj summer capital. She writes that the British settling in Simla sought to revive ‘memories of England’ by turning it into ‘an over-sized English club’.⁽²⁾ Although the Welsh missionaries in May’s work attempted to bring touches of home to Cherrapunji, they also indulged in measured amounts of cultural immersion so as to ingratiate themselves with the inhabitants. Studies of hill stations can be found elsewhere in the colonial historiography. For instance Eric T. Jennings’ *Imperial Heights: Dalat and the Making and Undoing of French Indo-china* ⁽³⁾ yields striking parallels between the French and British models. Perhaps future scholars could discover some un-mined comparative questions between these two models. Having built off Kanwar and Kennedy, May also draws from Catherine Hall’s pivotal exploration of British missionaries to Jamaica, *Civilising Subjects: Metropole and Colony in the English Imagination, 1830–67*.⁽⁴⁾ Hall focused extensively on the contact between missionaries and Jamaicans, greatly emphasizing the spiritual, national, and ideological mission of missionaries. More specifically, Hall analyzed how missionary interaction influenced racial ideologies in Birmingham. May, in writing about the foundation of a separate Welsh mission in India, places the domestic Welsh influence squarely in place as an integral factor.

The author devotes the first portion of the work to the creation and establishment of an independent and distinct Welsh missionary presence in northeast India. Thomas Jones’ early missionary career lends incredible texture to May’s exploration of this pivotal period. The Welsh missionary presence in India was born out of complex domestic issues between the Welsh Calvinist Methodist Church and the Anglican London Missionary Society (LMS). Prior to the late 1830s Welsh churches channeled their mission support – both financially and in terms of missionary applicants – to the LMS. Welsh Calvinist leaders became dissatisfied when the LMS began turning down Welsh candidates with noticeable regularity. Most notably, the LMS turned down the heavily qualified Reverend David Morgan. Jones himself, who asked to be sent to India, was instead instructed by the LMS that the climate of South Africa would be more suitable for his health. In August 1841 Welsh churches unilaterally voted to establish the Welsh Calvinist Methodist Foreign Missionary Society (WFMS). Ten months prior to the vote Thomas Jones set sail from Liverpool to India. The establishment of the WFMS spoke to more than just denominational differences, but to the desire of Welsh religious leaders to make their own unique imprint on the imperial and spiritual mission of Britain.

May devotes considerable time analyzing the significance of Jones’ and other colonial servants’ sea journey to India. May contends that the voyage held incredible spatial significance. The sea voyage represented the transition from metropole to periphery, but May also illustrates that many colonial travelers had developed a collective colonial image of India before they set sail. Steeped in orientalist travel literature, voyagers left Britain with a vivid image of what India *was*. Missionaries utilized the long sea voyage to prepare themselves for the task at hand.

It was not until Jones and other colonial servants arrived in India that they realized how complex and alien the imagined ‘heathen horde’ proved to be. In short, no amount of reading could have prepared Jones and others for the reality of India. Aside from practical matters, the newly founded WFMS had to develop a

strategy for establishing their mission in the northeast. May identifies the Serampore missionaries as being the prime example of Indian mission work. Established in 1793, Reverend William Carey oversaw the translation of the Bible into six different Indian languages, established elementary education curriculum, and other branches of missionary work with the help of Krishna Chandra Pal, the first Hindu to convert to Christianity (p. 53). British mission efforts extended further through the work of educator James Rae and Eurasian missionary Alexander Lish, who established mission work in the Khasi Hills in March 1832. These early mission efforts – translation of scripture and establishing elementary education – were driven strongly through intellectual practices of scripture translation and implementing education for Indian children.

In the second part of the book May analyzes British interactions with the Khasi people who inhabited the mountains of northeast India. The British viewed the Khasi as savage yet beautiful. Noble mountains begat noble savages. Despite this, British missionaries pushed the Khasi aside. The establishment of a British mountain station in Khasi territory served as a powerful symbol of colonial power. Welsh missionaries established their presence in the region in the 1840s. They settled amongst the Khasi. The close proximity between missionaries and the Khasi served a dual-purpose: to foster a relationship with the natives and to separate themselves from the British military presence in the area. This point illustrates May's argument that Welsh missionaries purposefully separated themselves from the strong arm of colonial power in order to spread their message more effectively and generate trust with the Khasi. The Welsh, Jones amongst them, followed the model established by Rae and Lish and began to translate the scripture for distribution. The Welsh also taught Khasi children reading and writing. The Welsh continued to build relationships with elite Khasi leaders and soon the missionaries had established a presence in the heart of the Khasi village.

The Welsh presence in Khasi did not pass without incident. In the eyes of Thomas Jones, Cherrapunji collapsed. A sex scandal, manifested through months of close proximity and sexual tension, fractured relations between Jones and other missionary leaders in the mountains. May also devotes a section to the important role women played in the missionary community, noting that the role of strong missionary wife was one held in high esteem by domestic supporters. After 1845 the Welsh mission struggled financially and Jones, crippled from several injuries, urged readers of the Calcutta press to donate funds. Prior to this, Jones had written the WFMS asking for further funds. In late 1847 the WFMS dismissed Thomas Jones from the mission. He didn't leave peaceably. Jones waged a bitter war with fellow missionary William Lewis in the press over the situation in Cherrapunji. The lack of funds, coupled with interest in the botanical resources of the area, resulted in an overlap of colonial interests. Over time, the British economic interests in the area grew. Potential wealth trumped the salvation of the Khasi. The Khasi, having trusted the Welsh presence in the area, were soon victims of the British scheme.

In the years following his dismissal Jones continued to attack the condition of Cherrapunji. As British economic interests flourished, concern for the Khasi's education and salvation became secondary, if that. Through the diligent work of Jones and other missionaries, the British were able to use the Khasi language, customs, and culture to subvert them. Jones, it seemed, was one of the few who noticed or raised a voice against it. Jones and the Welsh mission, despite their best efforts to carve out a unique niche in British India, had unintentionally aided the British in subduing the Khasi. Jones serves as a powerful metaphor for the Welsh mission in Cherrapunji: the zealous and earnest missionary eager to spread the gospel to Indians, only to find his ambitions sabotaged. The story of Jones and Cherrapunji is a powerful illustration of how missionaries and other colonial actors did not, in fact, march hand-in-hand towards colonial rule. Imperialism and colonialism presented different goals to the various actors, and as May has clearly shown, those goals were not monolithic.

In terms of organization May manages to masterfully weave the missionary career of Jones in and out of the text, a touch that not only engages the reader but balances the work nicely. May provides adequate warning to the reader about his fondness for flashbacks, but this strategy does not prove distracting in the slightest. May employs a variety of creative methodological techniques well. May draws from a variety of excellent sources that are worth noting: a wide collection of personal papers, diaries, and correspondence not just from missionaries, but civil colonial officials as well. The voices of men and women round the work out further.

The diverse selection of sources gives May's work a rich intimacy that makes the text easier to connect with. Furthermore, the chorus of primary voices means that the reader does not feel as if May relies too heavily on the accounts of his ancestor. The story of Thomas Jones certainly strengthens the book by illustrating May's personal investment in the topic. These human voices provide the book with the rich texture necessary in works on colonial experience. In addition to the individual voices, May utilizes organization minute books and records, pamphlets, articles, and a plethora of British, Welsh, and English language Indian newspapers. These sources convey the broader organizational and logistical effort behind missionary work, in addition to capturing the public's support and opinion about religion's place in colonial rule.

May's section on the intellectual aspect of early missionary movements is not only fascinating, but also yields the most potential for future elaboration and analysis. Bernard S. Cohn, building on the work of Edward Said, championed the theory that colonial nation-states, specifically British India, 'depended on determining, codifying, controlling, and representing the past'.⁽⁵⁾ Although Cohn and May both write on the importance of understanding the various languages across India, perhaps May or other scholars could apply Cohn's 'imperialism through knowledge' specifically to the missionary efforts to translate scripture into the vernacular. An exploration of this sort, however, does not belong in May's current work. The passages on this subject yield incredible potential and researchers will benefit substantially from May's analysis. A lengthy discussion of colonial meta-strategies could have easily derailed and muddled his tight, focused micro-history. Scholars of imperial missionaries could certainly benefit by drawing from May's methodology and combining it with works like Cohn's, to develop new arguments and theories about the intellectual side of mission work.

Andrew J. May's *Welsh missionaries and British imperialism* succeeds in terms of originality of topic, excellent methodology, readability of text, and richness of sources. Researchers and university students of every level will be able to use this monograph to develop a thorough idea of missionary history and colonial experience. Furthermore, his microhistory is both captivating and illuminating, engaging with broader imperial ideas of race, religion, and space. May's work deepens our understanding of British colonial experience in 19th-century northeast India.

Notes

1. Dane Kennedy, *The Magic Mountains: Hill Stations and the British Raj* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), p. 87.[Back to \(1\)](#)
2. Pamela Kanwar, *Imperial Simla: The Political Culture of the Raj*. Second Edition, (Oxford-New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), p. 3.[Back to \(2\)](#)
3. Eric T. Jennings, *Imperial Heights: Dalat and the Making and Undoing of French Indo-china* (Berkeley, CA, 2011).[Back to \(3\)](#)
4. Catherine Hall, *Civilising Subjects: Metropole and Colony in the English Imagination, 1830–67* (Chicago, IL, 2002).[Back to \(4\)](#)
5. B.S. Cohn, *Colonialism and its Forms of Knowledge: The British in India* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996), p. 3.[Back to \(5\)](#)

The author is happy to accept this review and does not wish to comment further.

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