

The Civilising Mission and the English Middle Class, 1792-1850: The 'Heathen' at Home and Overseas

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Reviewer: Rhonda Semple

Mary-Anne (Read) Rawson (1801–87) was everyone and no one. Raised in a family on the cusp of a professionalizing industrial Sheffield, as presented in Alison Twells's study, Mary-Anne and women like her both personified the absolute personal intimacy of evangelical piety, and married their belief and middle class privilege with a public critique of both the poor and poverty. In their having done so, Twells argues that such women affected change not only in individual lives, but also contributed to shaping the outlook of a maturing British nation as it grew as an imperial power across the 19th century. Detailed in its research and analysis, *The Civilising Mission and the English Middle Class* is about collapsing boundaries. Twells argues effectively against a too rigid application of the 'separate spheres' analysis; in so doing she outlines what is a porous interface between evangelical and humanitarian streams of reform, between private philanthropy and public reform movements, and she examines the links between domestic reform movements and those aimed overseas. Focused on Sheffield, Twells's study manages to situate the detailed analysis of a local study within the broader sweep of imperial connections. Historians who have focused on area studies of Empire have long argued that a close read of local conditions is necessary to understand the imperial interplay between places as diverse as Tahiti, Nova Scotia and Sierra Leone. This study contributes to a now significant body of scholarly work that one might argue does the same to English [imperial] society – breaking it down to its constitutive parts in order to understand just how English attitudes were formed and reformed across, in this case, the early part of the 19th century, by current religious and intellectual arguments, as class and gender constructions shifted and re-formed, and in response to the excitement and challenges brought to bear by foreign contact and ways of being.

That missionary philanthropy at home and overseas played a significant role in the formation of a modern English nation is a concept that has long been recognized. Various studies of Britain's imperial past have indicated ways in which the British economy, domestic politics and foreign affairs not only shaped but were shaped by her imperial worldview. Three decades of studies have further engaged readers in the ways and means by which British and in particular ways English society and culture were shaped by an imperial past. Similarly, the past 30 years have seen the serious academic study of missions grow significantly, and as Andrew Porter has argued, it is simply not possible to understand a Britain religious without taking into account its modern mission past. However, although most scholars note that important links existed between

home and foreign missions, and between the evangelical impulse and the secular philosophies that drove philanthropy at home and abroad, no one study has sought to knit together these strands. Alison Twells does just that. In putting together an examination of philanthropy at home and abroad, she examines how the England's 'civilizing' mission gave rise to the framework of middle class identity and culture. Further, she elides how that identity was based upon a culture of morally respectable intervention that formed the basis of a then novel claim to political power and social standing. And finally, although both men and women were mission philanthropists, she underscores how the women's work has been constantly under-reported, and thus their historic contribution to the creation of civic culture under-valued.

While the role of women in missionary projects was significant Twells argues that further reconsideration of their work is necessary and although there has been a significant amount of work published on this subject over the past decade this section of Twells's work is evocative. Through her choice to focus on a limited number of Sheffield's evangelicals, she manages to paint their world in vivid colours. It is a world of relative privilege. This is evident in their material reality, and their expression of a particular worldview, and it laid the basis for women's 'missionary domesticity' which in turn contributed to English notions of what it was to be modern and civilized. Evangelical women were busy indeed – the material comforts denoted to them by their middle class status kept them so, as did the evangelical imperative that they work to transform their world. Twells examines women like Mary-Anne Rawson in order to underscore her argument that such women, while both fully immersed in what was a busy domestic role, were also fully engaged in a public discourse as well. Mary-Anne was raised in Wincobank Hall, where she and her siblings were educated (away from problematic influences like the Church of England), where they learned to support charity through their savings and their volunteer efforts, where they wrote and published their own magazines and journals, and where they met with other evangelical families, missionaries on furlough, and like-minded politicians and public figures. The family renovated the laundry room into a chapel so that the family could worship together at home as well. That in itself gives some idea as to the size of the home and the family's relative privilege, but Twells inclusion of an image of the home fully underscores that point. This was no 'ordinary' English home, and the adults produced there took part of extraordinary times – Rawson herself was active in the anti-slavery movement and she is one of the few women recorded in the portrait recording the Anti-Slavery Convention of 1840. She was an active member of missionary bodies focused on work both overseas and at home, and through her letters, her writing projects, her sitting on boards and her hands on efforts, she did work to transform her world. However, Twells presents evidence that this reality was specific to Rawson and must be understood carefully.

In this close reading of Rawson's life we are presented a woman who is both 'like' other reform-minded women, yet not like them at all. While Mary-Anne Rawson espoused a philosophy of domestic mission philanthropy, in a phenomenon that has been analyzed by Deborah Gaitskell for foreign mission work, she was not 'that' woman herself and it was only in being otherwise defined that she could be as active and contributing a public woman as she was. Rawson and her toddling daughter returned home to Wincobank Hall in 1828 upon the death of her husband (p. 99) and as a result she had the support of her mother and sisters in raising her child and lived free from the spousal duties that may have distracted her from her own philanthropic interests. Rawson's friend Ann Gilbert stands counter to Rawson's reality. As a minister's wife and mother to eight children her life is described as constant motion – from working on her husband's correspondence to hosting guests to caring for young boarders, Gilbert argued that she needed more time to simply parent properly. With such evidence Twells quite rightly negates the suggestion that philanthropic activity served to relieve boredom. Further, although Twells underscores the need to collapse the analytic separation between supposed private and public spheres, in this instance it is Gilbert herself who offers scriptural authority to excuse her from her public efforts in order for her to focus on her home. However in reality, as was the case for Wincobank Hall, in the 1820s and 1830s her home was public; it had a swinging door for missionaries like John Philip, William Ellis and Robert Moffat, and for leading English evangelical leaders (p. 109). And while hosting such eminent evangelicals does not in itself attest to an active role, Twells additionally analyzes the rich private correspondence in which these women discuss their lives and work, and clearly articulate both theory and reality of what they believed to be their feminine evangelical

duty.

However, these lives were not just lived, they became prescriptive. Early 19th-century philanthropic literature posited the expectations of middle class living less as comfortable privilege and rather, as right and necessary. To place a further analytical framework upon the lives of these women, their evangelical 'duty' was being translated through a lens of biological binaries – that an evangelical woman need act on her faith in one way, while an evangelical man was able (and expected) to make quite different choices. A great deal of literature underscores the important argument that women's work, though different from men's, needed to be appreciated and valued; that the work remained different and was differently valued was due in no small part to prescriptive norms. Twells herself points out that men could be ordained while women could not. It was not until the 1860s that women began to be hired as missionaries in their own right, and it was at least another decade before that happened in any numbers. Prior to that, while missionary wives, as the wives of ministers, served the church and society both at home as partners and mothers and in more public roles, it cannot be ignored that in the period under discussion, gender mattered, and I would like to interrogate the rich material left by these evangelical women a little more rigorously from that perspective. Gilbert and Rawson each took the position that suffrage was not their fight – that their public contribution could be made in other ways (and each certainly did contribute) – but the reality remains that given all their identities, as white, middle class, evangelical and respectable, it was their gender that was paramount in that moment. Twells successfully queries a too rigid separation of home and public for these early 19th-century evangelical women, but there remain rich veins for further analysis.

The study focuses on untangling the process by which missionary philanthropy became central to the wider civilizing mission. Many if not all overseas missionaries trained and honed their craft in deepest darkest East London, in North London or in Edinburgh's Cowgate, and Twells's study argues that reality was less a quaint misunderstanding than a trans-cultural way of acting on an evangelical imperative. Many scholars have traced the root of modern missions in part to the Methodist challenge to affect individual transformation against an intellectual climate that argued that all societies had the capacity for change in general and salvation in particular. At the same time, English civil society was rocked to its core by the loss of the American colonies, war, revolution and the threat of its export, and was transformed through the creation of the newly propertied, reform-minded middle class. Twells outlines the growth of evangelical philanthropy from its roots in a paradigm that linked social improvement in individual moral reform, based on a historicized reading of the Bible as having meaning and application for all people. Locals and those overseas sinned equally – 'like Cherokees and Mohawks, but more wicked' (p. 27) – and could equally be brought to belief in the right environment, and with effective instruction. Twells argues successfully that there developed a mission 'culture' with overlapping circuits of discussion and action, if not a homogenous movement (pp. 34-), until the 1830s and 1840s when what uniformity had existed, broke down. From the 1820s there emerged a variety of critiques of overseas missions: some reformers thought local concerns such as the protection of sweeper boys in particular and the reform of English society more generally should take precedence over overseas work. Support for foreign missions was also undercut by evidence of resistance to Christianity and the recognition that foreign mission work required a long term commitment and required reform themselves, in order to affect real change. The result was a mission movement increasingly split between home and away, although as studies of the latter half of the 19th century show, overlap in organization and support remained.

Alison Twells has produced a rich study that is wonderfully detailed, readable and beautifully produced. While this reader might be prejudiced because of my interest in the topic, to me it is the mark of an excellent study that it makes me want more. There is a whole series of seminars posited here – one might focus on comparing Twells's Sheffield families and their networks in more detail to evangelicals in north London, another could tease out more about those women and how they interacted with men and women outside their evangelical networks, and another could focus on how those English 'Cherokees and Mohawks' read the pamphlets and responded to those visits from middle class ladies lit up with the spirit. In conflating boundaries Twells has contributed to our understanding of the creation of 19th-century civic culture that not only included but was shaped in important ways by the newly emerging middle classes. This is an important

study that underscores imperial linkages, the influence of religious belief and evangelicalism in particular, and the contribution of women to an understanding of public life in 19th-century England.

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