

close-down of Myanmar (alias Burma) under the military regime all but the last Burmese Jews have departed for America, Israel or Australia, barely a handful of stalwarts remaining to watch the once imposing and beautiful synagogue in Rangoon. Yet the narrative of the escape before the invading Japanese armies provides the most gripping part of the whole story, and to a great degree is based on first-hand accounts quoted *in extenso* by Cernea; yet her own prose enhances the robustness of this war-time tale.

Internally, too, geographical distance, commercial success and the onset of modern secular culture proved too much for the tiny and isolated Jewish community to withstand: new generations forgot their Iraqi pride and looked to Western Europe or North America – and then Israel – for models of behaviour and belief. There was, however, little assimilation, other than a few mixed-marriages, ambiguously sticking it out to the bitter end. Ironically, as the author points out, whereas many descendants overseas have lost touch with their Jewish roots altogether, it is from among these remnants of the mixed-marriage children that interest in Judaism and life in Israel has been rekindled.

Cernea's account is more history than sociology, more personal and involved than statistical and paradigmatic. She cites private letters and journals, as well as conversations with descendants and survivors of the Burmese community. The appendices also provide documentary lists of the Jews who sought refuge from the Japanese invasion, those who wished to emigrate to India or Israel, and those who now lie in the remaining (one hopes, although without real trust in the goodwill of the generals who want to destroy the physical remnants of this once thriving though small community) cemetery. Though Cernea explains in a delicate way necessary background in Sephardic Jewish customs and faith for the outsider, she seems to write — and this is a good thing, for general readers as well as the people it directly concerns — for the lost community, in honour of them, and with the nostalgia and respect due to them. If there is any quibble to make it is that many of the photographs reproduced in the book are so reduced it is hardly possible to see what they are meant to illustrate.

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Durba Ghosh and Dane Kennedy, eds., *Decentering Empire: Britain, India and the Transcolonial World*, New Delhi: Orient Longman, 2006, xi + 406 pp., ISBN: 81-250-2982-6 (hbk.).

This is a thought-provoking book exploring 'the boundaries conventionally drawn between imperial metropole and colonial periphery' (1). Its chapters are taken from a 2003 conference held at the University of California, 'How Empire Mattered: Imperial Structures and Globalisation in the Era of British Imperialism', a title which neatly summarises the central aims of the book.

Each of its chapters demonstrates the complexity of the colonial encounter, reinforcing in particular the limitations of imperial scholarship which posits the relationship between Britain and its colonies as somehow operating within a 'closed, bilateral circuit' (1). Instead, its authors argue that British imperialism unleashed a series of processes and exchanges involving commodities and ideas that extended well beyond the territories of the British Empire. As the editors note, colonial authorities were never entirely in control of the processes and exchanges that rapidly took on their own dynamism among the different colonies and between Britain and its colonies.

In charting these alternative paths to modernity and the expression of often contested forms of governmentality, the volume combines two contrasting approaches to imperialism. One approach informed by postcolonialism and the so-called 'cultural turn' sees scholars investigate the discursive aspects of colonialism. Another, more traditional in its methodological approach perhaps, principally examines the material exchanges between Britain and its colonies. Interweaving these cultural and material approaches to colonialism is a particular strength of the book. The perspective taken within the chapters and across the book as a whole is another. A number of authors take a geographically comparative approach, drawing together regions hitherto inadequately compared, such as parts of colonial Australia, North America and Tahiti (Anne Keary on missionary discourse) or India and Ireland (such as Durba Ghosh on hunger strikes). Overall, the book highlights the sheer variety of relationships and debates brought into practice by colonialism – moral censorship, medical education, photography, terrorism, imperial finance, irrigation control, and so on. A further strength is the focus on the differential and particularised expressions of state power that often cut across national boundaries. *Decentering Empire* is thus an excellent example of a great flowering of scholarship on empire that is threatening to unsettle notions of nation through comparative studies and trans-colonial perspectives.

I now move on to a discussion of the book's chapters. The first of these, by respected scholar John F. Richards, provides a fascinating overview of the problems, policies and economics of the East India Company (EIC), pointing out in particular the constant headache caused by the onerous effects war imposed on the coffers of the EIC. The EIC was, as the author notes, essentially one big tributary state whose investment in public works was simply negligible.

In the third chapter, Rachel Sturman presents an engaging case-study of the problems and complexities inherent in British attempts to define marriage practices in western India in the late nineteenth century. She demonstrates that British attempts to regulate Hindu marriage practices based on Brahminical marital conventions foundered because its lawmakers struggled to define these relationships within strict parameters of control. Instead the British found themselves embroiled in wider debates about the limits of state intervention in society, definitions of secular and religious matters, and boundaries between public and private spheres of life.

A fascinating study of hydraulic engineering by David Gilmartin reveals connections between India, Egypt and America, evidenced through the career of irrigation engineer William Willcocks. Gilmartin demonstrates that for Willcocks and for most other engineers trained at the College of Civil Engineering at Roorkee (from 1854, the Thomason College of Civil Engineering), irrigation works were not simply means of landscape engineering but also tools of colonial control. Engineers fervently believed that the object of their profession was to extract 'water's duty', a mathematical obsession which, if successfully realised, would in the process aid in the spread of European 'civilisation'.

Vahid Fozdar focuses on the tensions inherent between another particularly pernicious plank on which colonialism relied – racism – and the fraternal inclusiveness of freemasonry. He reveals that western-educated Indians were attracted to freemasonry because of its emphasis on equality while the movement in turn fostered imperial pride and loyalty. However, as Indian freemasons discovered, equality did not equate to the assumption of Indians to positions of high office in the Raj. Unsurprisingly when faced with such limitations of occupation, freemasonry extended well beyond imperial boundaries, allowing its brothers to view themselves as citizens of the world.

The chapter by Douglas M. Haynes examines the impact of the British Empire on another kind of imperial institution: medical professionalisation. Haynes argues that the move towards medical professionalisation in Britain cannot be understood without looking at the relationship between colonial requirements for medics and means of their licensing. As Haynes shows, within a short time, tensions developed between colonial and metropolitan bodies over where the authority to regulate medical professionalisation was vested. Haynes offers a well needed study that usefully brings together the largely distinct historiographies of colonial medicine and British medicine.

Keeping with the medical theme, Dane Kennedy explores the recognition of the 'socially constructed disease' (157) of tropical neurasthenia. Based around American colonial experience in the Philippines, its classification was increasingly applied in the inter-war years by the British. As a disease of civilisation, tropical neurasthenia was thought to affect primarily white male Europeans in tropical countries and manifested a combination of psychological and physical factors. These included loneliness, tensions between the demand for hard-work and efficiency in colonial tropical bureaucracy and its dilution by the enervating effect of the tropics, alcoholism, sexual deviancy, and so on. Kennedy argues that its diagnosis as a disease and hence something preventable by medicine, rather than a social problem of empire, was designed to assuage any doubts that might be raised about the very ethos of the colonial project itself.

From Haynes and Kennedy's emphasis on medicine, Anne Keary's chapter explores the tensions inherent in missionary scripture-based accounts of creation and both their interpretation by indigenous people and indigenous people's own cosmologies. The differing interpretations of scripture by

indigenous groups in Australia, North America and Tahiti demonstrate the significance accorded to place, culture and politics in determining the reception of Protestant missions.

In one of the most fascinating chapters of the book, Deana Heath compares moral censorship in Australia and India to reveal that, contrary to expectations, Australia's censorship laws were in fact far more stringent than those operating in India. Moral censorship in Australia was assumed by the state and presented as an important plank of national identity whereas in India the colonial state shied away from such regulation. Heath argues that this was because the British realised that their views on moral censorship would not have been supported by the Indian population, who most likely would have viewed such measures as yet 'another oppressive act carried on by an illegitimate government' (240). Heath's chapter is important for two further reasons. First, she demonstrates the erroneous assumption by which 'colonial ideology ... continues to be equated with colonial practice' (229). Secondly, she shows that valid comparisons can be made between India and Australia, thereby challenging 'their conventional categorisation as colonies of settlement versus conquest' (11).

The next two chapters investigate two contrasting forms of colonial resistance, respectively hunger strikes (Kevin Grant) and terrorism (Durba Ghosh). Grant demonstrates how a practice initially employed by Russian dissidents spread rapidly throughout the world, to be embraced by groups as diverse as Edwardian suffragettes to Indian and Irish nationalists. Each group, however, related hunger to its own cultural and political understanding, using this approach to offer a powerful form of protest against Britain's benevolent paternalism. Grant also shows that British attempts to devise a universal policy dealing with this form of protest struck problems as it encountered the different situations in which it was present. Ghosh's chapter charts another form of protest adopted by many Bengalis in the 1920s and 1930s: the Bengali revolutionary terrorist movement. As Ghosh shows, it was an upsurge which confused the British as it was primarily directed by those western-educated Bengalis who had proved so crucial to British rule in this period in their role as administrators of empire. Attending to its organisation, Ghosh reveals that this terrorist group depended on a global network of support, being influenced by similar movements in Ireland for instance. With an increasing clamp down on their activities in the 1920s and 1930s, the movement counted on British networks and established itself overseas, in Burma.

Three thought provoking chapters round out the book. Lisa N. Trivedi examines the visual culture of protest in a mostly illiterate society by exploring the political use to which the homespun cloth of khadi was put by Indian nationalists. Unlike the use of print culture to foster a shared sense of identity and nationalism as Benedict Anderson has argued, Trivedi demonstrates that for India's largely illiterate people the flying of khadi charkha flags in public spaces provided a visually readable protest against British rule. Public spaces and administrative areas associated with British

rule were targeted by protestors.

In another fascinating chapter on visual culture, Sandria Freitag explores the independent trajectory of Indian photography in Jaipur and Mysore. She demonstrates that the ways photographers responded to consumer demand created allegiances of identity and visual spaces of civil society beyond the confines of imperialism. Whether attempting to portray the uniqueness of Jaipur in colonial times and earlier or its more recent redefinition as a centre of crafts, Freitag shows that photography contributed in significant ways to the making and breaking of local identity, and the formation of the public sphere. This is reinforced by her study of Mysore's close allegiance between visuality and its middle-class identity with the past.

Respected Indianologist and world historian, C.A. Bayly, fittingly rounds off the collection. Bayly chronologically extends Thomas A. Metcalf's ideas expressed in *Ideology of the Raj* (Cambridge University Press, 1994) about the decline in legitimacy of British rule in India and Burma (Myanmar) from 1914 – where the focus of that author's work stops – into the 1930s and '40s. Bayly uses Metcalf's argument concerning the deep ideological tensions between British values and Indian experiences, to help explain the remarkably rapid decline of British authority in this period. Bayly identifies a gamut of factors that contributed to exploding the British liberal myth of racial hierarchies (particularly the notion of martial races) and its later olive branch of economic development. These factors included the interplay of shell-shocked and retreating British troops; the migration of lower-middle-class British to India creating job competition; declining race segregation in institutions; successful communist economic alternatives; North American and Australian behaviour and criticism of the Indian government; Japanese military success.

*Decentring Empire* is a welcome addition to the growing corpus of work on comparative and trans-national histories, and should appeal to a broad readership interested in imperialism. It is also useful in opening up future directions of research, most notably in teasing out the subtle inter-connections and divergences between, within and beyond the British Empire especially in relation to globalisation.

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Debjani Ganguly, *Caste, Colonialism and Counter-Modernity: Notes on a Postcolonial Hermeneutics of Caste*, London; New York: Routledge, 2005, xiv + 287 pp., ISBN: 0-415-342945 (hbk.).

This book is an important attempt at theorizing caste in the context of the recent debates on colonial modernity. It proposes to make a shift in the understanding of caste from the 'ideological' to 'phenomenological', where caste is considered to be an alternative way of living, of which 'pain and