Introduction: Claims to Belong

Susan Pedersen

In *Ceremonies of Possession,* her account of the varied ways in which Europe's expanding nations sought to mark their conquests abroad, Patricia Seed notes the particular emphasis seventeenth-century English colonists placed on fences and hedges, houses and gardens. If the Spanish marked ownership by proclamation and the French by ceremony and ritual, the English, true to their history of enclosure and improvement, "inscribed their possession of the New World by affixing their own powerful cultural symbols of ownership—houses and fences—upon the landscape."[1] And what was born of conquest flourished on homesickness, social aspiration, and cheap labor. Two centuries later, the British in India had stocked their faux-highlands summer resorts with the village churches, half-timbered Tudor villas, and cottage gardens of an imagined rural English world.[2] As late as the 1930s, as Evelyn Waugh put it, the Kenyan settlers were still trying "to recreate Barsetshire upon the equator."[3] Small wonder, then, that Britons so often represented their policies of rule (from policing in Bengal to counterinsurgency in Kenya) as the defense of "home."

But how, exactly, could the British make the empire their "home"? And what happened to their trademark institutions and identities—to social clubs and Mothers' Unions, law codes and literatures, career officers and their housebound wives—in settings where the British were so profoundly "out of place"? The articles presented in this issue all grapple with these questions. Through the study of such varied subjects as nationality law, Anglo-Indian clubs, the social lives of Anglo-Indian wives, and cinematic representations of Britain's late-colonial wars, they describe the strategies and practices through which various groups of Brit-

SUSAN PEDERSEN is professor of history at Harvard University.

[1] Patricia Seed, *Ceremonies of Possession: Europe's Conquest of the New World, 1492–1640* (Cambridge, 1995), p. 25.

[2] For which, see Dane Kennedy, *The Magic Mountains: Hill Stations and the British Raj* (Berkeley, 1996), chaps. 3 and 5.

[3] Evelyn Waugh, *Remote People* (1931; reprint, London, 1934), pp. 182–83.

Journal of British Studies 40 (October 2001): 447–453

ons, both within the empire and in the metropole, sought to establish their claims to belong. The insights they offer are multiple and resist easy categorization, but one theme nevertheless comes out—the central role played by women, and particularly by wives, in the maintenance, defense, regulation, and representation of imperial rule.

This is in some ways well-trodden historiographical ground. As we know, colonial governors, political theorists, literary figures, and reformers routinely evoked two female figures—the figure of the debased and sexually vulnerable native woman and the figure of the elevated but equally vulnerable white woman—when making the case for empire. From the debate over sati early in the nineteenth century to the Anglo-American denunciation of Indian child marriage one century later, discussions and representations of native women performed crucial "ideological work" in support of British dominion.[4] Likewise, as studies of the suppression of the Indian mutiny, the introduction of race-based "purity" laws in Port Moresby, or the British debate over the Amritsar massacre make clear,[5] no figure did more to authorize draconian policing or unequal laws than that of the sexually vulnerable white woman, counting on the strong men of empire to keep her safe from harm. "As women we must ever pray for your Excellency's welfare," the self-identified "Ladies of Port Antonio and Manchioneal" wrote to Governor Edward Eyre shortly after his suppression of the Morant Bay uprising, "for if the men return thanks for their lives alone, we return ours to you for saving us from every indignity a female most dreads."[6] Eyre, facing questions from a Royal Commission wondering why he had burned to the ground some thousand houses of black Jamaican laborers and peasants, submitted such testimonials as proof of his devotion to the defense of "home."

In pointing to the role played by white women in establishing "claims to belong," then, these articles draw on some familiar themes. Yet, in their attention to married women in particular—to their centrality

[4] There is now a good deal of historical work on British constructions of—and attempts to reform—Indian gender relations. For a useful summary of nineteenth-century patterns, see Thomas R. Metcalf, *Ideologies of the Raj* (Cambridge, 1995), esp. pp. 92–107.

[5] Again, this literature is now substantial, but for the cases mentioned here, see Jenny Sharpe, *Allegories of Empire: The Figure of Woman in the Colonial Text* (Minneapolis, 1983); Amirah Inglis, *"Not a White Woman Safe": Sexual Anxiety and Politics in Port Moresby, 1920–1934* (Canberra, 1974); Derek Sayer, "British Responses to the Amritsar Massacre," *Past and Present,* no. 131 (May 1991): 130–64.

[6] *Papers Laid before the Royal Commission by Governor Eyre, (PP), 1866,* vol. 30, p. 478. I am grateful to Elaine Kwok for bringing this letter to my attention.

to the cultural symbolism of empire and to the energy and vigor of their lives and loyalties—they also sound some new notes. Of course, as Mrinalini Sinha's work on Anglo-Indian women's mobilization against the Ilbert Bill suggests, married Anglo-Indian women's imperial activism often threatened to escape the framework of powerlessness that they themselves employed; as Florence Nightingale knew well, a reputation for purity and self-sacrifice could be strategically deployed.[7] Here, however, we find wives not simply using their reputation for weakness but rather rejecting it utterly; not simply putting up with the discomforts of empire but seeking them out. "Danger is interesting and necessary to the human spirit," Freya Stark, the inveterate traveler, wrote in 1934.[8] As Mary Procida's article makes clear, at least some colonial wives appear to have agreed with her.

Yet, what we might call the "wives' romance with empire" was not a matter of elective affinity alone—of the "right sorts" choosing a colonial-officer spouse to escape the rigid gender roles and useless lives scripted for them at home. For if the empire, in a sense, "emancipated" wives, it did so—as all these authors make clear—on its own terms. Anglo-Indian clubs opened up to women, Sinha notes, because the need to maintain racial solidarity far outweighed the significance of gender; put simply, maintaining the privileges of "whiteness" was far more important than excluding women. "The planter's wife" came to represent Britain's determination to "hold on" in Malaya not because women were flocking to such roles but rather because of the obvious symbolic advantage to be gained from placing such (moral, domestic) women on the metaphorical front lines. By contrast, the anxieties so often expressed by colonial officials about the morals and loyalties of single Englishwomen abroad find their cinematic expression in the figure (also analyzed by Wendy Webster) of the spinster reformer, untrustworthy on racial questions and likely to endanger British male lives through her ignorant meddling. Marriage, then, made women "safe" for empire, especially since (in British nationality law) women's loyalty to spouse and their loyalty to nation were required to coincide. M. Page Baldwin's finding—that

[7] Mrinalini Sinha, " 'Chathams, Pitts, and Gladstones in Petticoats': The Politics of Gender and Race in the Ilbert Bill Controversy, 1883–1884," in *Western Women and Imperialism: Complicity and Resistance,* ed. Nupur Chaudhuri and Margaret Strobel (Bloomington, Ind., 1992), esp. pp. 106–7. Note, e.g., Mary Poovey's brilliant early analysis of the military and imperial imagery pervading Nightingale's rhetoric. Mary Poovey, *Uneven Developments: The Ideological Work of Gender in Mid-Victorian England* (Chicago, 1988), pp. 194–98.

[8] Freya Stark, *The Valleys of the Assassins and Other Persian Travels* (London, 1934), p. 69.

the desire to maintain imperial solidarity easily trumped feminist arguments for wives' individual rights—probably holds true in other areas beyond nationality law.

The effort to be "at home in the empire" thus produced, it seems, some real changes in marital relations and gender roles. But these colonial arrangements are interesting not only for the ways in which they disordered metropolitan ideals and forms but also because they help to illuminate the particular character of imperial social relations themselves. We should remain alive to these insights; indeed, as Mrinalini Sinha (drawing on Lata Mani and Ruth Frankenburg) writes here, unless we place metropole and colony within the same analytical frame, we "run the risk of domesticating the empire"—of reducing it "merely to a site from which to interrogate the metropole" (p. 491). The articles presented here are, I think, alert to that danger; that is, they are attentive to the ways in which Anglo-Indian clubs and hunts, imperial conferences and legal codes became not merely colonial variants of metropolitan forms but rather new, peculiar, things in themselves, constitutive parts of what Sinha characterizes as an "imperial social formation."

These articles are, however, circumspect; that is, they explore the meanings of such specific institutions, relations, or cultural forms in particular settings but resist making grand generalizations about the character of the later British empire itself. They are, certainly, wise to do so, for their findings are specific and local: the energetic but rather useless lives of Procida's sports-obsessed wives seem quite far removed from the equally energetic but profoundly useful philanthropic efforts undertaken by the wives of Nigerian district officers studied by Helen Callaway.[9] Nevertheless, holding the unfettered privileges of a guest editor—and with all four articles and Sinha's thought-provoking exhortation before me—I find myself struck by some suggestive commonalities between them. Read side by side, and less for what they can tell us about British gender relations than for what they can tell us about the nature of late imperial rule, these articles suggest two tentative conclusions—or, to put it more mildly, two possible topics for further investigation.

First, they might lead us to investigate the ways in which British dominion in late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century India and Kenya allowed settlers and administrators an almost aristocratic style of life—and, hence, how those social relations both mimicked and differed from aristocratic behaviors in Britain a century earlier. Such an inquiry into the class foundations of empire has a long and honorable genealogy:

[9] Helen Callaway, *Gender, Culture and Empire: European Women in Colonial Nigeria* (Urbana, Ill., 1987).

Joseph Schumpeter considered imperialism socially atavistic in its dependence on aristocratic younger sons looking for a sphere of action as their native lands industrialized and democratized. Marxist and Leninist accounts, and the work of a later generation of economic historians, put paid to this hypothesis: the growth of capitalism and the steady drive for markets came to figure as the motors of—and not the checks upon—imperial expansion. Yet, with Procida's gun-toting wives in mind, perhaps we should revisit Schumpeter's views, if not as a description of the real social origins of those European colonizers, then at least for their insight into how those colonizers might have experienced and understood their role. For, as Procida notes, the "huntin' and shootin'" culture of the Raj, while perhaps new to the middle-class girls who joined the ranks of official wives, would have seemed less strange to aristocratic daughters; the form of gender relations it fostered—with its emphasis on strenuous leisure, personal display, and the shared exercise of ruling-class power—was perhaps less "unfeminine" than un–middle class. This conscious effort to recreate the world of the English lord was, in fact, precisely what Waugh found so attractive in Kenya's settler society—especially since one need not have either wealth or title to succeed in it. Lady Olive Crofton dispatching a prospective robber on a rail journey or Hilda Bourne facing down a cobra in the garden, not to mention Mrs. Raynes-Simson and Mrs. Heselburger gunning down three Mau Mau intruders into their home, recall such Disraelian heroines as Lady de Mowbray or Sybil, "showing blood" in the face of marauding racialized hordes of Chartists, miners, or vagrants threatening their domestic space.[10]

But with one crucial difference. In Disraeli's novels wellborn women exercise their powers unarmed. Their courage is moral and not physical; their power derives from character and not weaponry. Colonial wives in India and Africa, by contrast, were prepared to defend the "British home" with Colt revolvers and shotguns, and—as both Webster and Procida show—the fact that they were calmly dispatching human beings rather than game neither masculinized nor discredited them in either their husbands' or the British public's mind. Such extolling (and not simply acceptance) of female violence, especially in a culture prone to equate femininity with pacifism, points not only to the depth of anxiety about colored men's possible sexual predations but also to the crucial role of violence in the maintenance of imperial rule.

This is a second suggestive point. Violence—both political violence and interpersonal violence—is close to the surface in several of these

[10] See esp., Benjamin Disraeli, *Sybil* (1845; reprint, Harmondsworth, 1980), esp. pp. 480, 483.

articles, and its role deserves more analytical attention. For while aristocratic dominance in pre-Reform Britain was always as much a matter of negotiation and theater as it was of force (as E. P. Thompson's classic articles on eighteenth-century social relations always recognized), these articles imply that force was a central (if not sufficient) basis for imperial rule. The study of crises of legitimacy and colonial rebellions would drive that lesson home: the "Pittite terror" in Ireland, the policing of pre-Independence India, and the response to colonial risings in Malaya and Kenya all involved levels of repressive force unknown and increasingly unimaginable in Britain itself.[11] Indeed, the successful democratization of Britain, its containment of class and—especially during the interwar years—pursuit of a politics of conciliation and social peace made its public even less able to grasp the possibility that imperial territories could be governed on quite different lines. Eleanor Rathbone, traveling to India in 1932 to argue with Indian feminists about constitutional reform, was shocked by the extent of arbitrary arrest and detention and returned doubting the government of India's legitimacy or fitness to rule. Her surprise is as instructive as her response.[12]

If we heed Mrinalini Sinha's call, then, and investigate imperial institutions and practices not only for what they can tell us about British identity and ideals but also as part of an "imperial social formation" with a life and logic of its own, the mobilization of the domestic in defense of "claims to belong" would be an appropriate subject of study. But that such a mobilization may have involved a mimicking of aristocratic norms or masked a culture of violence might also repay some attention. Armed both literally and with the potent rhetoric of the defense of home, Kenya's settlers pressed the British government into one of the bloodiest of Africa's counterinsurgency wars—but what domestic vision, exactly, was being defended? For not only were those British homesteads in Kenya founded on the dispossession of many Africans from their homes but their protection during the Mau Mau emergency was accomplished through a policy of forcible detention of many thousands of Kikuyu men for a period of some years, the razing of African settlements and houses, and the construction of "secure villages" for women, children, and the elderly. This process more thoroughly dispossessed Kenya's Kikuyu population than even the initial land alienations; fami-

[11] For the twentieth century, see esp. David M. Anderson and David Killingray, eds., *Policing and Decolonisation: Politics, Nationalism and the Police, 1917–1965* (Manchester, 1992).

[12] University of Liverpool Library, Rathbone Papers XIV.1.8 and XIV.1.9, EFR to her family, 3 February and 7 February 1932; and *Hansard Parliamentary Debates,* 5th ser., vol. 265 (29 April 1932), cols. 744–49.

lies were separated and in some cases never reunited.[13] It takes a particular kind of colonial logic to see this process as a defense of civilization, a particular kind of colonial imagination to represent it as a defense of home. The more thoughtfully we build that local context into our analytical framework, the more fully we will grasp what it might mean to claim an empire as "home."

[13] I am indebted to Caroline Elkins for my understanding of counterinsurgency and pacification strategies in Kenya. See Caroline Elkins, "Detention and Rehabilitation during the Mau Mau Emergency: The Crisis of Late Colonial Kenya" (Ph.D. diss., Harvard University, 2001).