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Book Review

Empire, Gender, and Bio-Geography: Charlotte Wheeler-Cuffe and Colonial Burma by Nuala C Johnson (2023). Routledge, London.

Tracing the life of amateur botanist and colonial wife Charlotte Wheeler-Cuffe, who was based in colonial Burma between 1897 and 1921, this book gives the reader a glimpse into the lives of British elites and colonial administrators and explores the intersection of gender and race in the production of colonial scientific knowledge. Johnson drew on archival sources including private and official correspondence, diaries, sketchbooks, photographs, paintings and plant lists. By documenting the life of one woman, the author aims to illuminate female agency in the production of colonial botany beyond the officially recognised and professional spheres. As a white woman from the core of British Empire, Wheeler-Cuffe could not access or gain recognition in official botany as a man could, but as a white coloniser in Burma around the turn of the 20th century, she was privileged with opportunities to undertake fieldwork and to disseminate her work. What is most striking, although underexplored, in the book is how her colonial position of power and appropriation of Indigenous knowledge were central to her ability to botanise. Although her work proved influential and she clearly pushed the limits of gender norms for British colonisers, Wheeler-Cuffe was a staunch supporter of Empire and its 'civilising' mission, and ultimately upheld the power structures that maintained her disadvantage as a woman in science and her immense privilege as a British woman in Burma.

Summary

Part I explores the Wheeler-Cuffe's early years in Burma. She accompanied her engineer husband, Otway, who served in the British colonial administration there for 24 years. Wheeler-Cuffe was clearly enthusiastic about this adventure with her new husband and eagerly embraced her new life in Southeast Asia. She often expressed her fascination with her new home, although such expressions of admiration usually revealed her orientalist and exoticising views of the place, if not revealing her outright racist opinions on local cultures and peoples. Wheeler-Cuffe quickly took advantage of opportunities to travel with her husband on his work trips in the surroundings of Thayetmyo where they were initially based. Refusing to confine herself to the typical domestic duties of colonial wives, she confidently entered such masculine spaces. This section explores the role of gender in

both botany and colonial administration. Johnson argues that Wheeler-Cuffes's presence in sites of engineering works and infrastructural development with her husband challenged dominant ideas of colonial femininity. Meanwhile, although European botany had been significantly defeminised as it moved towards professionalisation, and a wider gap between academic and popular botany arose, Wheeler-Cuffe's impressive skills in topography, cartography and even the Burmese language helped her to avoid criticism of her presence on fieldwork with Otway. Despite an inability to be officially and institutionally recognised in the field of botany or many other colonial sciences at the time, she used the combination of her white privilege and ability to perform in masculine spaces to gain access to the field. In this section we also get our first insights into Wheeler-Cuffe's racist attitudes towards local Indigenous knowledge; sometimes admiring it but sometimes adopting a patronising attitude of imperial superiority.

Part II explores many of the exhibitions made by the Wheeler-Cuffes as Otway was frequently redeployed to different parts of the colony, and the plants collected and documented by Charlotte on these trips. In the early years of the twentieth century, she became accustomed to fieldwork and she eventually started to gain some recognition for her sketches, with some opportunities to exhibit and sell her work both in the colony and metropole. Although she was not professionally employed as a botanist, her paintings and sketches were moving through networks that were useful for botany, for example for identification. We see how her whiteness often negated her femininity on fieldtrips, securing her place near the top of the social order above native labourers. This section also gives a deeper insight into Wheeler-Cuffe's interaction with the Indigenous population and landscape in Burma. She saw displays of English etiquette by locals as a source of comfort and a confirmation of the civilising influence of empire. She also participated in the colonial ranking of local people, positioning them along an axis from traditional to modern. For example, when a visitor wants to photograph some local people, Wheeler-Cuffe assembles what she considers a higher and more respectable class of Burman. She learned the local language and in many ways was admiring of the cultures she encountered, but at the same time her position remained one of colonial domination over Indigenous peoples, mixing in colonial circles and explicitly expressing her support for empire. While Johnson does make fleeting references to these racist attitudes and colonial relationships of domination, they are not the main focus of the book. Rather, they are usually mentioned as an aside to the telling of the story of Wheeler-Cuffe's life and botanical work, which is frequently painted in quite a romantic light.

Part III gives the reader even more of a perspective on Wheeler-Cuffe's position in relation to empire, as well as the role of gender and race in her botanising. We see her orientalist view of the landscape as she seems to prefer the jungle to the colonial settlements she encounters in Simla, India. Wilderness, presumably, is what a white European seeking adventure expects to find in Southeast Asia, rather than any form of "civilisation". It was towards the end of her time in Burma that Wheeler-Cuffe got the opportunity to develop a botanical garden in Maymyo. However, throughout this time she still situated herself as an amateur, and in some ways ignorant, in comparison to white male experts. Nev-

ertheless, she still positioned herself as an expert in relation to the Indigenous Burmans who, in fact, did much of the collecting of plant species and shared much of their local knowledge with her, for which she largely took credit. The author makes it clear that the native labour needed to produce Wheeler-Cuffe's botanical work was largely obscured. However, again in this section some of the references to this colonial relationship are brief and not expanded upon. Johnson argues that botanical gardens were contact zones and sites in which centre-periphery relationships were challenged, but she does not say how they were challenged. She also seems to contradict herself, framing Wheeler-Cuffe's engagement with local languages and scripts as a commitment to them, rather than as a means of appropriating local knowledge. The couple left Burma in 1921 to retire at their estate in Ireland, with Charlotte being recognised by the Keeper of the Botanic Gardens in Glasnevin as having made a name for herself in the botanical and plant world. Despite pushing the boundaries of what a white woman could achieve in a male-dominated field, her work would not have been possible without the immense privilege of her position as the wife of a British colonial official in Burma. This privilege often mediated her gender disadvantage in the colony, but her work and the views she expressed ultimately served to uphold the same systems of oppression that she navigated so well.

Discussion

While dealing with the themes of gender and empire in the production of colonial botanical knowledge, this book mainly reads like a biography of Wheeler-Cuffe's life during her time in Burma. Through this, the reader gains an insight into the world of British colonial officials, with the author drawing attention to a brief analysis of the themes from time to time. Fanonian scholars have highlighted race as a condition for the construction of knowledge (e.g. Towns, 2018), and the colonial encounter with nature is in itself an "epistemological site of struggle" (Sultana, 2022, p. 6). However, although colonialism is addressed by the author at certain points – for example, in how Wheeler-Cuffe's whiteness mediated her gender in masculine spaces, and how Indigenous knowledge was central to her work but largely obscured – the author's position sometimes appears contradictory, as she obscures the violence of the Wheeler-Cuffes' presence in Burma in three main ways.

First, in her discussion of the position of women in botany in the 18th century, she writes about their exclusion from the discipline and its defeminisation. However, she does not specify that she is writing specifically about British botany, a universalising and Eurocentric knowledge system produced through the epistemic violence of colonial expansion that enabled the collection and documentation of plants in the colonies (see Basu, 2024). British or European knowledge is universalised here, positioned as synonymous with knowledge in general.

Second, although the author recognises the Indigenous labour obscured in the work produced by Wheeler-Cuffe, the book does not acknowledge the inherent violence of the colonial relationship between British colonial officials and native people and landscapes.

Epistemicide has been a key tool in colonising projects, with modernity's epistemic categories emerging largely within the context of imperial violence (see Phiri, 2024). Therefore, a failure to address the epistemic violence of this relationship obscures the context in which Wheeler-Cuffe's botanical knowledge was produced.

Third, although there is a discussion of how gender intersected with whiteness to allow Wheeler-Cuffe to do the work that she did, she ultimately did not challenge the structures that determined her position or that of the Indigenous Burmans. In her constant description of herself as an amateur, she reinforced the masculine exclusivity of botany, while the book clearly shows that she supported empire and colonialism through both her actions and her words. Though she may have broken certain norms, this was largely due to a mixture of coincidence and privilege. However, Black feminist scholars have illuminated the inseparability of racist and patriarchal systems, and argued that understanding and challenging them requires abandoning the tools of those systems and adopting alternatives (Lorde, 2018).

Ultimately, despite not taking a firmly critical position towards empire, this book can serve as a useful resource for those interested in the finer details of the lives of colonial administrators who participated in the production of colonial science, especially in relation to how this history has shaped contemporary botany in Britain and Ireland.

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