

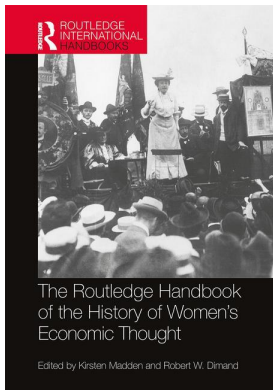
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Kirsten Madden, Robert W. Dimand

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Janet Seiz

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3

BRITISH WOMEN ON THE BRITISH EMPIRE

Janet Seiz

As the 17th century opened, the British overseas empire consisted mainly of several struggling settlements on the eastern edge of North America and a few trading posts on the Indian sub-continent. Over time, while those territories grew, Britain acquired islands in the Caribbean that it used for highly profitable sugar plantations, and established posts in Africa to facilitate its participation in the slave trade. Colonies were added in Australasia and lost in the American Revolution. After Britain abolished slavery in the empire in 1833, it set out to fight the slave trade that remained; ironically, this entailed enlarging its claims in Africa (Huzzey 2012). By the close of the 19th century, Britain possessed the empire on which “the sun never set,” encompassing nearly a quarter of the world’s land area and population.

In Britain’s intellectual and ruling circles, the empire generated frequent debate. There were arguments about its economic benefits compared with the costs of rule; the roles of religious ambitions, commercial interests, and national rivalries; the moral legitimacy of colonial rule; and the ways in which colonies could best be administered. These discussions drew in government officials, reformers, political economists, clergymen, capitalists, and philosophers; they occurred almost exclusively among men. There were, however, a few British women who managed to play significant roles in this discourse. This chapter will discuss three whose voices were important in the 19th century:

- Harriet Martineau (1802–1876)
- Mary Kingsley (1862–1900)
- Flora Shaw Lugard (1852–1929)

While they were different in many ways, these women had several characteristics in common:

- They received little formal schooling, and mostly educated themselves by reading prodigiously.
- They were born into solidly middle- or upper-class families, but they had to become self-supporting as young women: they did so with their writing.
- They had frequent bouts with illness, sometimes related to overwork. Martineau was also hampered for most of her life by severe hearing loss.

- They traveled quite extensively—extremely rare in their time, especially for women—and wrote about their first-hand observations abroad.
- They believed strongly that the empire could serve the interests of both Britain and the peoples of its colonies.
- They worked hard at shaping public opinion, and they reached large audiences.

The three disagreed considerably about their country's colonial policy, which should not surprise us. As numerous feminist scholars have shown, British women held a wide range of views on, and played varied roles in, the empire (Burton 1994; Chaudhuri and Strobel 1992; Jayawardena 1995; Midgley 1998).

All three of these writers were intensely aware of how anomalous they were as women who had visible influence on public affairs. Privately at least, they all expressed frustration with the restrictions their society imposed on women, but only Martineau championed feminist ideas: she wrote extensively on women's need for better education and wider life opportunities, and she was an early supporter of the campaign for women's suffrage. Mary Kingsley played an ambiguous role: at times she voiced support for traditional gender norms, but the experiences she reported in her books implicitly made a mockery of them. Kingsley opposed admitting women to the Royal Geographic Society (Birkett 1992, pp. 155–57), and both she and Shaw publicly disavowed the suffrage movement. Helly (2012, p. 125) suggests that perhaps Shaw “came to agree with those who were concerned that women's suffrage might pose a threat to vital imperial policies.”

Harriet Martineau (June 1802–June 1876)

Harriet Martineau, a “novelist, translator, reviewer, journalist, children's author, personal correspondent, political campaigner, travel writer, pamphleteer, memoirist and historian” (Dzelzainis and Kaplan 2010, p. 1), was one of the first women in Britain to become a successful professional writer and a major public intellectual. Born in 1802 into a business family in Norwich, she began her writing career in the 1820s when an economic downturn caused her father's business to fail. Her writing focused mainly on religious themes until she became interested in the emerging “science” of political economy and read the works of Adam Smith, David Ricardo, Jeremy Bentham, Thomas Robert Malthus, and James Mill. In 1832 she secured a contract to write a monthly series of fictional tales that she called *Illustrations of Political Economy* (1832–34), aimed at popularizing the ideas of the new political economy. The series, which grew to 25 volumes, was a surprise bestseller, and brought Martineau both fame and financial independence.¹

Martineau sought to help the British public understand the core ideas of Smith *et al.* about the liberatory power of *laissez-faire* capitalism. The institutions of secure property rights, market competition, and free trade would stimulate individual effort and spur technological progress, bringing about widespread improvement in living standards. The *Illustrations* covered a variety of situations and locations, including colonies, to demonstrate the broad applicability of the principles. At the urging of her publisher, Martineau went on to write two more series of tales, *Poor Laws and Paupers, Illustrated* (1833–34) and *Illustrations of Taxation* (1834).

After the years of intense work on those economic writings, Martineau decided to visit—and study—the U.S. She stayed for two years, and was fêted, hosted, and lobbied by many prominent citizens, including both abolitionists and slave owners. She wrote two books about her visit: *Society in America* (1837) and *Retrospect of Western Travel* (1838a). *Society* combined engaging descriptions of places and activities with strongly critical observations on slavery, the situation

of women, and other weaknesses in American democracy; the book created controversy in both Britain and the U.S. *Retrospect* was a more conventional travelogue. During this period Martineau also produced *How to Observe Morals and Manners* (1838b), now considered the first treatise to outline a method for systematically studying a society. Because of this, Martineau is said by some to have been among the creators of sociology (Hill and Hoecker-Drysdale 2001). Some years later she produced a two-volume abridged translation of Auguste Comte's *Positive Philosophy*, the book's first edition in English (Martineau 1853); Comte was the originator of the term "sociology."

Writings on empire

In her Preface to *Illustrations of Political Economy*, Martineau told readers they could expect a variety of settings: "As society is in widely different states of advancement in various parts of the world, we have resolved to introduce as wide a diversity of scenery and characters as it might suit our object to employ" (1834a, vol. 1, p. xvi). She set several of the narratives in colonies, conveying in them what she then thought of empire. In "Life in the Wilds," the first tale in the series, British settlers in southern Africa have all their material resources stolen or destroyed in a raid by hostile natives. The natives, Martineau explained, had earlier been dispossessed of their land by the colonists and "hunted down like so many wild beasts," which "naturally made them fierce and active in their revenge" (Martineau 1834, vol. 1, Tale 1, p. 4). The story centers on the colonists' recreation of their prosperous society through diligent work and application of Smith's principle of the division of labor. One reviewer called the tale a synthesis of *Robinson Crusoe* and *The Wealth of Nations* (cited in Logan 2009, p. 225). In "Demerara," a young brother and sister return from England to their family's sugar plantation in the West Indies, where they try to teach their father about the moral evil and economic inefficiency of slavery. This narrative made Martineau famous among opponents and defenders of slavery on both sides of the Atlantic. "Cinnamon and Pearls" was set in Ceylon, and offered an extremely harsh portrayal of the East India Company's conduct there. In granting the Company a trade monopoly, Britain had in effect given merchants permission

to make what they could of the natives of the land as well as of the sea; – not only to appropriate the natural wealth of the region, but to bring its inhabitants as near to the brink of starvation as they pleased in their methods of employing their toil.

Martineau 1834, vol. 7, Tale 2, p. 20

Ceylon could have generated economic betterment for its native population as well as wealth for the British, but instead the Company's exploitation had been ruinous. Britain's claims that its presence helped the Ceylonese are exposed as disingenuous. A friendly clergyman tries to remind a group of angry natives of the benefits colonization has brought them:

"[Y]ou speak as if the English settlers were thieves. You speak as if it was nothing to have wise and skillful strangers come to teach you the arts of life. You speak as if you forgot the protection afforded to you by the government of the mother country, and the expense incurred by her for your support."

Martineau 1834, vol. 7, Tale 2, p. 110

The natives respond that the British are, in fact, robbing them of their valuable pearls and spices, and that they do not require British instruction. As for protection,

“From what do they protect us? . . . If they will go away, we will protect ourselves against their returning; and our own expenses we can bear as soon as ships from every land may come to trade on our shores.”

Martineau 1834, vol. 7, Tale 2, p. 111

Continuing, the natives argue

that slavery could not be said to be abolished while labourers were dependent for daily bread on the arbitrary will of a monopolizing party; and that, excellent as was trial by jury, the prevention of the manifold crimes which spring from oppression would be still better.

p. 111

The tale concluded that Britain should abolish the Company monopoly and restore control over Ceylon’s resources to the natives, so that they could pursue mutually beneficial trade with whomever they wished.

These early fictional works showed that Martineau was not afraid to voice radical criticism. She would continue to address questions about the empire throughout her long career, in more than a dozen books and hundreds of articles. She wrote most about Ireland and India.

Ireland

In 1852 Martineau made a three-month visit to Ireland as a correspondent for the London *Daily News*, beginning a career as a newspaper journalist that would last for 16 years. Her dispatches, which appeared in the newspaper unsigned, were collected and published under her name a few months after her return as *Letters from Ireland* (1852).

Ireland was, in a sense, England’s oldest colony, having been subjugated repeatedly from the 12th century on, with large tracts of its land being awarded to men from England and Scotland. In 1800, an Act of Union had dissolved Ireland’s parliament and put the country fully under British rule. Half a century later, it was still an almost entirely agricultural society, mostly Catholic and mostly poor.

When Martineau toured, the country was still recovering from the Great Famine of 1845–49, in which close to a million people (almost an eighth of the population) had perished of starvation or epidemic disease. Most of the Irish were agricultural wage laborers or tenant farmers, renting from British landowners. Martineau was appalled by the poverty she saw. “A few days of observation of how the people live,” she said, “merely by our going to see them, are sad enough to incline one to turn away, and never come again” (Martineau 1852, p. 150).

English observers had long tended to blame “Irish culture” for the people’s plight: centuries-old stereotypes held the Irish to be undisciplined, averse to work, duplicitous, violent, and slovenly (Curtis 1968). Martineau forcefully refuted those assertions, insisting that the problem lay not in the country’s people, but in its economic institutions. The complex and rigid land tenure system made it difficult to sell land or to lease it long-term. Tenants’ plots were often too small to provide a family subsistence. The lack of secure property rights discouraged land improvements, keeping productivity low. “A tenant,” Martineau explained, “is not very likely to lock up his capital in buildings, and sow it in the soil, when he cannot reckon on remaining long enough to recover it” (Martineau 1852, p. 38).

She denied that laziness was an innate Irish trait. “There seems to be no room,” she wrote, “for a theory of constitutional indolence here” (Martineau 1852, p. 58). In Ireland as elsewhere,

people worked hard when their returns were decent, but could be seen “dawdling over their business when hungry and discouraged” (1852, p. 58). The landowner, she noted, “talks of the lazy nature of the labourer, and pays him so little that he has not strength for severe toil, and needs to lie down in the sun as soon as his employer’s back is turned” (1852, p. 208).

While Martineau recognized that Ireland’s problems were deep, she was not pessimistic. If the constraints on disposal of land could be eased,

we shall see a common ground provided, on which owners and tenants can traffic. We shall see long leases, landlords’ improvements in loving company with those of the tenant, rich fields, full barns, and rising plantations, with no smoke of the assassin’s blunderbuss curling among the trees.

Martineau 1852, pp. 47–8

In the near term, emigration would continue to reduce the labor supply, enabling wages to rise for those left behind. In the longer run, the country needed educational reform, agricultural modernization, industrialization, and the spread of wage labor. Although she understood Irish nationalist agitation, Martineau insisted that Ireland should not demand independence. Its underdevelopment was due most of all to lack of capital and entrepreneurship, and those could best be supplied from Britain. The country needed to upgrade its institutions, with British guidance and British investment. Independence would only mean that Ireland’s agricultural stagnation would be perpetuated.

India

Although she never had the benefit of first-hand observation, Martineau also wrote a good deal about Britain’s most prominent colony, India. Colonization there had been almost accidental, according to the conventional story: The East India Company, created in 1600 to trade with the subcontinent, over time acquired territory in the interest of protecting and expanding trade and entered into security agreements with many local political authorities. By the 1800s, the Company was the *de facto* ruler of much of India, subject to rather loose parliamentary supervision. The Company was deprived of most of its trade monopoly in 1813 to make room for more British firms; its largest remaining product was opium, which it exported quite profitably to China, in violation of Chinese law. In 1833 the Company saw all of its monopoly privileges abolished, but it retained its administrative authority; the peculiar hybrid became less “company” and more “state.”

In 1857–58, a rebellion against British rule called this arrangement into question. Sensational stories of Indian “savagery” appeared in Britain, and there was talk of punishment. During this tense period, Martineau wrote two books: first a concise history titled *British Rule in India* (1857), then a contribution to the policy debate, *Suggestions toward the Future Government of India* (1858).

The “Mutiny” had come as a shock in Britain, and Martineau again sought to play the role of public educator.

Our footing in India began and extended without the national cognizance, as it were; and when the region became ours, it was not ruled by the British Government; and to this hour it has never ostensibly been so. It is no colony of ours. It has never been national territory, peopled from home, and organized under the English constitution and laws. The question now—and a tremendous problem it is—is whether India shall be a colony of ours; whether it shall be ruled by the British Government as a colony.

Martineau 1858, p. 4

The territory called India, she explained, was populated by many separate peoples, divided by language, religion, governance, and history. “The inhabitants never were a people; and they have not become so under our rule” (Martineau 1858, p. 29). The rule of the East India Company had had largely positive results, Martineau argued: certainly there had at times been rapaciousness, ill-treatment, cultural insensitivity, and corruption, but these had diminished, and the most important thing was that the Company had rescued India from “anarchy” and constant war. Indians, she said, “are evidently more content under our rule than any other—because we have saved them from other conquerors, and have made their lives easier than they ever were before” (Martineau 1858, p. 30). The potential now existed for vast economic gains, which could be widely shared.

As Macaulay has observed, the people of India were clothed in fine muslins and shawls of Epicurean beauty when our ancestors dyed their skins with woad; and their great men lived in the splendour of a fairy tale before our kings lived in palaces: and yet the resources of their territory had scarcely begun to be attended to. . . . If well governed, India must yield occupation and subsistence to hundreds of millions of human beings, at home and abroad.

Martineau 1858, p. 11

We need India as a source of occupation and wealth; as answering most of the purposes of a colony, and others that no colony ever aspired to. We want it as an ever-expanding market for our manufactures, and as a mine of natural wealth, in the form of raw materials for those manufactures. We desire it as a territory, thickly peopled in comparison with any of our colonies, but admitting and requiring a far larger population to make the most of its resources. We want to clear its jungles, to open its mines, to thin its forests, to till its wastes, to make use of its rivers; and thereby to call into existence tens of millions of human beings who would not otherwise be born. We want to call millions into existence at home by the same means, and to improve the lot in life of millions more.

Martineau 1858, p. 114

This did not mean, however, that India should be brought under stronger government control. Martineau insisted that continued Company rule was preferable to making India a Crown Colony.

If we hastily decide that India shall be a Crown colony, ruled directly and entirely from England, according to existing British notions and habits of colonial government, we shall lose India, speedily, disgracefully, and so disastrously that the event will be one of the most conspicuous calamities in the history of nations.

Martineau 1858, p. 1

She was scornful of the government’s competence to administer a distant colony. Members of Parliament clearly knew almost nothing about India. Political considerations would shape their decisions, and policy would be erratic as governments changed.

A parliamentary Government of India, with its political oscillations, its inevitable ignorance and rashness, its adverse chances, where it is improbable that any measure should be good, and thorough soundness would be a matter of miracle, can never be assented to by any man, inside or outside of the Company’s pale, who has even the necessary preliminary knowledge of the conditions of the case.

Martineau 1858, p. 131

Britain's government would never be able to match "the public-spirit, the generosity, the liberal appreciation of improvements and of merits which have always—and never more than now—distinguished the rule, spirit, and temper of the East India Company" (Martineau 1858, pp. 137–38). "India has long been, and now is, governed on behalf of the Indians; whereas, from the hour when so-called parliamentary government should be instituted, that aim could never more be steadily maintained and fulfilled" (Martineau, p. 145).

These assertions of the Company's benevolence and wisdom strike the reader as both exaggerated and naive (Logan 2009, pp. 133–38). Ultimately, however, her argument appeared to rest on the need for expertise.

We should not hastily extinguish the power (too singular to be ever replaced) by which our Asiatic empire was acquired and has been sustained, without cost to the British people, while supporting millions of them by a commerce capable of comprehending tens of millions more. We should not throw away the vast stores, or crush the prodigious apparatus of Indian knowledge which exists in the midst of us, combined in the form of a government unparalleled in the history of the world for civic success and social progression.

Martineau 1858, pp. 146–47

Similar arguments were made at the time by John Stuart Mill, who had been an employee of the East India Company for most of his adult life. The campaign did not succeed, however: in 1858 Parliament dissolved the Company and declared India a Crown Colony.

During the 1860s Martineau continued to write about the empire, commenting on British policies toward India, Ireland, China, Africa, and Egypt. She also wrote about slavery, the U.S. civil war, women's education, and other subjects. Tallies of her published works vary, but it is safe to say that she authored at least 70 books and close to 2,000 newspaper and magazine articles. She died in June 1876, aged 74.

Mary Kingsley (Oct. 1862–June 1900)

Mary Henrietta Kingsley liked to describe herself as an outsider who felt more at home in West Africa than in England. Her father was from a family that produced several celebrated writers. A physician and amateur anthropologist, he spent much of his time accompanying rich patients on long journeys abroad. Her mother had been a servant in his household, and became his wife only a few days before Mary was born; she was in perpetual poor health, and young Mary served as her nurse. Kingsley obtained most of her education by exploring her father's library and sometimes helping him with his research. When both parents succumbed to illnesses in 1892, when she was 30, Mary dutifully moved in with her brother. She managed his house for him, along with doing her own work, for the rest of her short life.

Kingsley first traveled to West Africa in 1893, ostensibly in order to continue her father's study of indigenous religions (then referred to as "fetish"). She stayed for five months. Her second trip lasted almost a year, from late 1894 to late 1895. This time she was commissioned to collect specimens of fish for the British Museum as she pursued her own ethnographic research.

On her journeys Kingsley traveled by boat along the West African coast from Sierra Leone to Angola, with some incursions inland by river and extended stays in towns. She saw territories claimed by Britain, Spain, France, Germany, and Portugal. Kingsley usually stayed in the homes of other foreigners, either traders or officials or missionaries; but she took some excursions on her own, traveling with small crews of Africans. To meet her expenses, she would trade,

exchanging items such as fishhooks, wire, tobacco and cloth for services rendered or for rubber and ivory that she could later sell; her trader guise, she explained, allowed her invaluable face-to-face contact with local people (Frank 1986, p. 63).

Returning to Britain in late 1895, Kingsley immediately became a celebrity: she was the intrepid lady explorer, the naturalist, the expert on West African native societies. Over the next four years she gave public lectures to a variety of audiences, from meetings of scholarly societies to ticketed gatherings of the general public that numbered as high as 2,000. She created an amusingly eccentric persona for her public lectures, looking stern in old-fashioned long black dresses, and she often disarmed her audience with self-mockery (Frank 1986, pp. 257–58).

Her use of humor did not obscure the seriousness of her work. Kingsley's expertise and dedication won her access to prominent people both in and out of government. She wrote articles on West Africa for leading newspapers and journals. She knew well the individuals who were most involved in shaping colonial policy in Africa, and behind the scenes she engaged in extensive letter-writing, networking, and face-to-face lobbying (Birkett 1992).

Kingsley wrote two important books, *Travels in West Africa* (1897) and *West African Studies* (1899). The first was primarily a narrative of her travels, intended for a popular audience, and it was a huge success. The second was more scholarly and less cohesive, containing chapters on native religion and culture and on Britain's political and economic relationship to the West African territories it claimed. This book too was widely read and mostly well-reviewed (Birkett 1992, ch. 7).

In parts of her books, Kingsley employed a self-deprecating, ironic voice, often mocking the conventions of adventurer writing and seeming to skewer imperialist pretensions (Blunt 1994; Mills 1991). An example is this passage from the second book:

My reputation as a navigator was great before I left Gaboon. I had a record of having once driven my bowsprit through a conservatory, and once taken all the paint off one side of a smallpox hospital, to say nothing of repeatedly having made attempts to climb trees in boats I commanded, but when I returned, I had surpassed these things by having successfully got my main-mast jammed up a tap, and I had done sufficient work in discovering new sandbanks, rock shoals, &c., in Corisco Bay, and round Cape Esterias, to necessitate, or call for, a new edition of *The West African Pilot*.

Kingsley 1899, p. 89

The books vividly described the landscapes she saw, the challenges of travel, and the interactions she had with both Europeans and native Africans. The travel stories were to some (unknown) degree exaggerated, in part to make them more entertaining (Birkett 1992). Kingsley wrote frankly about the colonial system she observed. She found herself in strong sympathy with the British traders she met in Africa, whom England's elites generally viewed as an uncouth and unsavory group, and she often defended the trading companies' interests in policy discussions. She had extremely low regard for the work of most missionaries, and she was frustrated by government officials' lack of knowledge about African societies.

Kingsley did not strictly oppose British colonialism in Africa, but she held strong views on how it ought to function. She accepted the economic argument for colonization:

[The tropical African] markets are of enormous value to us; they are, especially the West African ones, regions of great natural riches in rubber, oil, timber, ivory, and minerals from gold to coal. They are in most places densely populated with customers for England's manufactured goods. The advantages of such a region to a manufacturing nation like ourselves are enormous; for not only do we get rid there of our

manufactured goods, but we get, what is of equal value to our manufacturing classes, raw material at a cheap enough rate to enable the English manufacturers to turn out into the markets of the civilized world articles sufficiently cheap themselves to compete with those of other manufacturing nations. The importance to us of such markets as Africa affords us seems to me to give us one sufficient reason for taking over these tropical African regions. I do not use the word justification in the matter, it is a word one has no right to use until we have demonstrated that our interference with the native population and our endeavours for our own population have ended in unmixed good; but it is a sound reason, as good a reason as we had in overrunning Australia and America.

Kingsley 1899, pp. 296–97

British domination had so far not led to “unmixed good,” of course, and Kingsley worked diligently to make colonial policy more humane. Two particular debates occupied her: British traders’ sales of liquor in West Africa, and the “hut tax” that the British imposed in Sierra Leone in 1898.

The liquor trade was the subject of a significant public controversy. “Trade spirits” had been widely used in the days of the trans-Atlantic slave trade, even functioning at times as a medium of exchange. By the 1890s, alcohol was still a trade staple: the liquor was largely manufactured in Germany and sold by British traders to African middlemen who then sold it further inland. Colonial administrations depended heavily on liquor duties for revenue. Temperance organizations, whose influence in Britain was growing, began waging a vigorous campaign against the trade, in company with British cotton manufacturers who apparently hoped that the less Africans spent on liquor, the more they would spend on cotton cloth (Olorunfemi 1984).

Kingsley took on this powerful coalition. Observant readers of the prestigious *Times* newspaper, she said in one article, would have seen “how the contemplation of the liquor traffic with Africa gives rise to a feeling of great personal moral elevation, combined with a conviction of the iniquity and absence of high moral ideal in other nations and in persons” (Kingsley 1898b, p. 537).

Speaking from personal observation, she testified that, contrary to some assertions, West Africans rarely drank to excess, so the trade did not present a danger to them.

I have no hesitation in saying that in the whole of West Africa, in one week, there is not one-quarter the amount of drunkenness you can see any Saturday night you choose in a couple of hours in the Vauxhall Road [in London].

Kingsley 1897, p. 633

Further, liquor was vital to expanding Britain’s commerce in the region. Restricting the trade in spirits would

check the expansion of trade in other goods, for spirit is the introducer of other trade—the West African wants it more than he wants your other things, except only guns and gunpowder. He has native equivalents for those other things.

Kingsley 1898b, p. 551

To an opponent’s declaration that liquor was an indulgence that did not “promote habits of thrift and industry,” Kingsley retorted that “your West African native is not the man to wear himself to a thread—paper to buy what he don’t want” (1898b, p. 551).

Kingsley's arguments may have carried weight, or perhaps the Colonial Office simply could not figure out a better source of revenue. In any case, the government did not prohibit the liquor trade in West Africa until the First World War.

Kingsley's battle over the Hut Tax was not so successful. Early in 1898, the British imposed a substantial tax on native dwellings in Sierra Leone, as it had done in other colonies. Local chiefs objected that the tax was both onerous and offensive, but they were not heeded. Many people refused to pay, and efforts to force them to do so provoked rebellions. Kingsley urged British officials not to continue pursuing a military solution, but to simply revoke the tax, because it was both unjust and counterproductive. In "African law," she explained, an article that a person had to pay for regularly belonged not to the payer but the payee. To the natives, therefore, imposing the tax was akin to the government's declaring it was confiscating their houses (Kingsley 1898a). British Colonial Office officials did consider her advice, but in the end they retained the tax.

In *West African Studies*, Kingsley also sought to intervene in the broader debate over how Britain's West African territories could best be governed. At the time, Britain held Lagos as a Crown Colony and had established a Niger Coast Protectorate, while other territory was administered by the Royal Niger Company. The government was considering enlarging the area ruled as a colony. Kingsley argued forcefully that this would be a serious error.

I have attempted to state that the Crown Colony system is unsuited for governing Western Africa, and have attributed its malign influence to its being a system which primarily expresses the opinions of well-intentioned but ill-informed officials at home, instead of being, according to the usual English type of institution, representative of the interests of the people who are governed, and of those who have the largest stake in the countries controlled by it—the merchants and manufacturing classes of England.

Kingsley 1899, p. 314

West Africa's harsh climate and the prevalence of tropical diseases ensured that mortality rates were high for Europeans, so postings to West Africa were not seen as desirable. Officials who did venture there tended to serve short tours of duty interrupted by long furloughs, so the colonies had little continuity of administration. Each new governor came in with his own tastes and schemes, resulting in much wasteful expenditure.

One Governor is truly great on drains; he spends lots of money on them. Another Governor thinks education and a cathedral more important; during his reign drains languish . . . and so it goes on, and of course leads to an immense waste of money. And this waste of money is a far more serious thing than it looks; for it is from it that the policy has arisen, of increasing customs dues to a point that seriously hampers trade development, and the far more serious evil of attempting directly as well as indirectly to tax the native population.

Kingsley 1899, p. 330

Kingsley maintained that British traders were far better suited than the state to look after British interests in West Africa. Unlike the short-term colonial official, the traders knew the local people and had an economic interest in promoting their well-being:

To that [British colonist] family man the native is a nuisance, sometimes a dangerous one, at the best an indifferent servant, who does not do his work half so well as in a decent climate he can do it himself. To the trader the native is quite a different thing, a customer. A dense native population is what the trader wants; and on their wealth, prosperity, peace and industry, the success of his endeavours depends.

Kingsley 1899, p. 295

The system Kingsley proposed was a highly original variant of trading-company rule. The Chambers of Commerce of Liverpool and four other major commercial cities would nominate an African Council, which would select a Governor General for West Africa, subject to government approval. There would be two advisory subcouncils: one would include British legal and medical experts, and the other would be an elected group of African chiefs. A relatively small number of Britons would be needed to reside in Africa and administer the system. Revenue would come from taxes on private trading firms and the proceeds from government monopolies on tobacco imports and timber exports. The local population would not be taxed directly. This system, Kingsley argued, would be far less oppressive than Crown rule. Those in charge would be knowledgeable about the people and uninterested in saving their souls or otherwise transforming their cultures; Africans would have a formal voice in policy discussions; and the merchants' self-interest would push them to promote native prosperity.

Kingsley was no doubt over-optimistic about how Africans would fare under her scheme, but her prime objective was to protect the people from British interference and appropriation of their land. She wanted economic development to be a voluntary process rather than a forced and exploitative one. Predictably, her proposal made little impression in policy circles. Britain's Colonial Office under Joseph Chamberlain had a vision for the economic transformation of West Africa, and so a new Crown Colony of Northern Nigeria was created in 1900.

Britain was also seeking to increase its control elsewhere on the continent at this time, and in 1899 the British went to war against the two Afrikaner (or Boer) republics of South Africa. Kingsley volunteered to serve there as a nurse early in 1900. She arranged to report on the war for British newspapers while in South Africa, and planned to resume her travels in West Africa afterward. On her arrival she was assigned to care for wounded and sick Boer prisoners of war, which meant working long hours under terrible conditions. Within less than two months she contracted typhoid fever, and she died there—and was buried at sea—at the age of 37 (Frank 1986).

Although Kingsley did not always win the policy battles she fought, she had a considerable impact on Britain's relations with Africa. Her work helped shape perceptions of Africa among both specialists and the general public. For years she pressed for the formation of an organization for Africa experts, arguing that Europeans could not competently or responsibly govern peoples whom they did not understand. Shortly after her death, her historian friend Alice Stepford Green led the creation of the Royal African Society to honor Kingsley's life and work (Birkett 1992). That organization (still active) has played a significant role in promoting inquiry and improving British knowledge about Africa.

Flora Shaw (Dec. 1852–Jan. 1929)

Flora Louise Shaw was born into an upper-class family, the fourth of 14 children. Her father was an Anglo-Irish military officer, and her mother was the daughter of the last French Governor of Mauritius. She received no formal schooling, but read extensively in the library of the Royal

Military Academy, which her father commanded. John Ruskin, the renowned art critic and social thinker, served as a mentor, helping to guide her reading. When Flora was 18 her mother died, and for a year she took over the care of her younger siblings. In her 20s, like many young women of means, she spent two years doing social work in the East London slums. In hope of earning money to live independently and support her sisters' education, she began writing novels for children, one of which was quite successful (Helly 2012).

On a visit to Egypt with family friends in 1888–89, Shaw became interested in colonial policy. She began to write for W.T. Stead's *Pall Mall Gazette* and the *Manchester Guardian* and decided to attempt a career as a journalist, though she knew she would encounter obstacles. When the *Guardian* sent her to Brussels in 1889 to cover the International Anti-Slavery Conference, she was the only woman reporter present. In 1890 she was hired by the *Times* of London to write a regular (unsigned) column on Colonies. The paper's owner was not told until two years later that Shaw was a woman (Helly 2012, p. 119).

As a correspondent for the *Times*, Shaw traveled to South Africa, Australia, New Zealand, and Canada in 1892 and 1893. The articles she sent back touched on many topics, but she focused especially on the colonies' potential for economic development. She favored the idea of a grand confederation of Britain's white settler colonies, and was disappointed to find that the colonists had little interest in forming closer economic and political ties with each other. Australia, she reported, was a social and cultural extension of England, with an industrious settler population thriving on a physically diverse continent. The visit that most impressed her was the one to South Africa, where British and Afrikaner colonists were coexisting uneasily with each other and with native Africans in a territory of extraordinary economic promise. British diamond mining and gold mining operations were beginning to flourish and generate fortunes, and the agricultural possibilities seemed enormous: "Everything that is written of the material resources of this astonishing country must read like exaggeration, and yet exaggeration is hardly possible. The fertility of the soil is no less amazing than the mineral wealth" (Shaw 1893a, p. 36).

The challenge was to find enough labor. The climate would likely prevent large-scale settlement by whites, and so the country's potential could be realized only if some "system or process could be devised by which the average raw native could be converted into an effective labourer" (Shaw 1893a, p. 93). Colonists often said "that the native is inherently lazy and that nothing but force will compel him to work," but in many cases, employers' "real trouble is not that they cannot get labour but that they cannot get it at their own price" (Shaw 1893a, p. 99). Most natives had access to land that assured them of subsistence. Working for wages was not necessary for survival, so natives had to be induced to it. This would be no easy task.

[T]he ordinary native is like his ordinary fellow-man in this—that he does not care to work after his most pressing wants have been satisfied. A wife is soon bought, a hut is soon built, and when these objects have been accomplished, he defies white energy by preferring a pipe in the sun to all the luxuries which continued labour could accumulate.

Shaw 1893a, p. 20

Shaw had observed in the diamond and gold mining areas that "the native has shown not only that he can work, but that he will work, if for any reason it becomes worth his while. Up to this point there is not one of us who is not essentially lazy" (Shaw 1893a, p. 99). The colonists, she urged, must not try to force people to work, using taxes or other coercive means; such schemes were merely "slavery in disguise." Instead, employers must attract labor by offering sufficiently high wages. In the longer run, she proposed that native land tenure systems could be reformed

so that land was owned by individuals rather than in common. Those who parted with their land would then be “of necessity labourers,” and more natives would migrate to the areas of high labor demand (Shaw 1893a, p. 101).

Shaw’s African dispatches, having been extremely well-received, were republished (still without her name) as *Letters from South Africa* (1893a); the Australia writings followed, titled *Letters from Queensland* (1893b). That year, the *Times* promoted her to Colonial Editor, making her, at 41, the highest-paid woman journalist in Britain (Helly and Callaway 2000, p. 53). Her authority was soon recognized in another setting as well: in 1894 she presented papers on “The Australian Outlook” and “Colonial Expansion” to the Royal Colonial Institute, being the first woman to speak before that all-male learned society (Helly 2012, p. 122).

Shaw’s writing on the colonies was engaging, well-researched, thoughtful, and flattering to British sensibilities. Her power of persuasion probably also benefited from the fact that she was beautiful and tremendously charming, a prominent presence in both intellectual and social circles (Perham 1956, p. 647). No other woman had comparable influence on colonial matters. She was personally close to the men who set Britain’s colonial policy in Africa, including Joseph Chamberlain (the Colonial Secretary), Cecil Rhodes, and George Goldie (head of the Royal Niger Company). Her position at the *Times* gave her an ideal audience for her purposes: that paper, as one author put it, was “the daily issue of authoritative print that all the people of education and influence in the country . . . certainly the ‘top people of the day’—had been reading” (Perham 1960, p. 64).

One tribute to Shaw’s influence is a name: in a January 1897 column in the *Times*, she suggested that the area referred to as the Royal Niger Company Territories be renamed “Nigeria.” The government did exactly that in 1900, when it took over control from the Company and created the Crown Colony of Northern Nigeria (Perham 1960).

Shaw became deeply involved in the complicated politics of South Africa. In *Letters from South Africa*, she suggested that British and Afrikaner settlers could all prosper there, the Afrikaners as farmers and the British as industrialists. Tensions between the two communities increased, however, and Shaw strongly supported the British side. In 1895 she was involved in the planning of what turned out to be a disastrous military action by British soldiers, and she had to devote considerable energy to defending herself, the *Times*, and the man who had financed the operation, Cecil Rhodes (Helly and Callaway 2000). Later she would be an eloquent supporter of Britain’s 1899–1902 Boer War.

After ten years at the *Times*, Shaw resigned as Colonial Editor in 1900, citing poor health. She had written “over five hundred articles on economic and political issues in the colonies, vigorously supporting British expansion, by military force if necessary” (Callaway and Helly 1992, p. 79). She would continue to write on colonial affairs for another decade. In 1902, at almost 50, Shaw married her friend Sir Frederick Lugard, a military officer celebrated for his successful campaigns in Central Africa, Uganda, and Nigeria. He was High Commissioner for Northern Nigeria from 1900 to 1907, and would serve as the first Governor General of the consolidated Colony of Nigeria from 1914 to 1919. Flora found living in Africa with him was too difficult, in part because of her delicate health, so she returned to England, where Lugard joined her for a few months a year until he retired from colonial service in 1919 (Perham 1960).

As Lady Lugard, Flora continued her work as a scholar-advocate, writing primarily about West Africa. In a 1904 paper titled “Nigeria,” she declared that while public interest in Britain’s empire had so far focused mainly on the white settler colonies of America, Australasia, and South Africa, she was certain that “our next colonial chapter will be a tropical chapter” (Shaw 1904a, p. 370). The tropical colonies presented special challenges: how to find and exploit new economic opportunities, and how small white populations might govern large non-white ones who had very different modes of living.

Nigeria, she said, showed what was possible: the slave trade had been suppressed, and Lord Lugard was establishing a system of “indirect rule” that worked through pre-existing political structures, similar to that developed in British India. Those were “but the first steps by means of which we, as it were, reclaim a waste from history for cultivation.” Once order was established, “we naturally hope that some material advantage shall result” (Shaw 1904a, p. 380). In particular, she foresaw a vast expansion of cotton cultivation in Nigeria that would benefit Britain’s textile industry.

In another 1904 paper, “West African Negroland” (i.e., the Nigerian interior), she summarized the history of western Africa, noting that in some periods there had been African civilizations far more advanced than those in Europe. She incorporated this glorious past into her own formulation of Britain’s “civilizing mission.”

Our hope is now that, in . . . carrying British administration for the first time into the fine uplands of higher Negroland, it may be our happy fortune to initiate a new era of prosperity, and to introduce into those countries blessings of peace and justice under which the qualities these peoples showed themselves to be possessed of in the past may ripen to a finer fruit.

Shaw 1904b, p. 321

She further elaborated this theme in her 1905 book, *A Tropical Dependency*, which provided a prodigiously researched (though not entirely accurate) history of western Africa, from ancient times to the present, and closed by articulating her imperialist vision for the future.

The administration of Northern Nigeria is but five years old. Its duty has been to bring under control a congeries of states, of which the internal disorders necessitated, in the first instance, a resort to the plain argument of military conquest. The administration has not in the short period of its existence been able to do more than to affirm the conquest of the country, and to create a skeleton of the machinery of government which it will be for time to bring to its full perfection. But a beginning has been made. . . . A territory which we found in chaos has been brought to order. The slave trade has been abolished within its frontiers. Its subject races have been secured in the possession of their lives and property. Its rulers have been converted with their own consent into officials of the British Crown, and are working sympathetically to promote an order of things that shall render a return to old abuse impossible. There has been no great shock and no convulsion, only into the veins of a decadent civilisation new blood has been introduced, which has brought with it the promise of a new era of life.

Shaw 1905, pp. 499–500

The natural resources of the tropical colonies, just beginning to be explored, offered inestimable riches—if people could be found to do the work of cultivation and extraction. She expressed optimism about the prospects.

Tropical labour is coloured labour, and we have not yet faced the question of organising free coloured labour. But that this question has not yet been faced is not a reason why the difficulties attending it should be regarded as insurmountable.

Shaw 1905, p. 3

After 1905 Shaw’s public visibility declined, though as Lugard’s wife she continued to be involved in policy discussions. In recognition of her authority in colonial matters, she was asked

to write the 1911 *Encyclopaedia Britannica* entries on the “British Empire,” “Nigeria,” “Cecil Rhodes,” and several other topics. During the First World War, Lady Lugard led successful efforts to organize relief for refugees from Belgium. After the war her health problems worsened, and she died in England in 1929, aged 76 (Perham 1960).

Assessing Flora Shaw’s achievement, one scholar commends her

sweep of mind which embraced both the colonies of white settlement and the tropical colonies in one span of thought. She was the first in the literary world—and outside Parliament and the Colonial Office—to unite a vast range of experience in both the temperate and the tropical Empire. Others knew well some colonial territories, but her travels—first alone, and then in company with her husband—brought her a range of first-hand acquaintance which few outside the official world had had before that time, and none had had the opportunity to bring to a wide audience.

Cumpston 1959, p. 74

Concluding reflections

What were these writers’ contributions? Where did they agree and disagree? How did their ideas compare to the received wisdoms of their times regarding racial hierarchy and the morality of empire? We will conclude with some reflections on these questions.

One would not say that any of these writers made original contributions to political-economic theory on empire. Their many discussions of economic policy issues—public finance, colonial trade, infrastructure investment, land tenure, work incentives, labor relations—were informed by current economic thinking, but their aim was to help policymakers and the public choose sides in existing debates, not to argue with economists.

Their disagreements were deep. Harriet Martineau, writing in the 1850s, looked forward to economic and social progress in Ireland and India with British assistance, but she was wary of increasing British government control over distant territories. Her work conveys ambivalence: she portrayed colonial authorities sometimes as thoroughly benevolent and other times as essentially exploitative, and she never satisfactorily resolved this inconsistency. Decades later, in the 1890s, Flora Shaw endeavored to build public support for empire, so that Britain would devote more resources to territorial expansion, political consolidation, and economic development, especially in Africa. Mary Kingsley, perhaps a reluctant imperialist and certainly a skeptical one, saw much potential for economic benefit but sought to protect Africans from British domination.

Racial hierarchy

Ideas about empire have always been closely entangled with ideas about “race”: Europeans used assertions about “race”—in fact, constructed their concepts of race—to justify imperial domination. In the 19th century, the term’s meaning was unsettled: the “English race” might be distinguished from the Irish, for example, blurring the lines between the biological and the cultural. In any case, in those times the dominant British view was that Britain was the most advanced and progressive of all societies, and that the colonized peoples of Asia and Africa were backward in comparison. These women writers were, of course, products of their times; but it is worth noting that Martineau and Kingsley energetically contested some of the principal racist ideas then in circulation.

Martineau touched on the subject of racial inequality in many of her writings on colonies and on slavery. She consistently attributed apparent group differences to institutional

and environmental factors, rather than to innate biological endowments; in this she followed Adam Smith, John Stuart Mill, and other classical political economists (Pitts 2005).²

In 1838 she decided to attack the race question differently. She wanted, she said in an 1838 article, to address the question “whether negroes are constitutionally, and therefore irremediably, inferior to whites in the powers of the mind.” Appearances were misleading, since any observed limitations could be due to “the circumstances amidst which negroes have lived, both in their own countries and abroad” (Belasco 2000, p. 165). But if some black individuals were found to have as much “genius” as the most eminent whites, it would prove that being black was compatible with the very highest levels of achievement. Martineau saw such genius in Toussaint l’Ouverture, who led the slave rebellion in Haiti that in 1803 created the hemisphere’s first black republic: As she put it, he showed “what the negro race at large can do and become” (Belasco 2000, p. 165). Her fictionalized biography of Toussaint, *The Hour and the Man: A Historical Romance* (1841), was widely read on both sides of the Atlantic, despite its 900-page length.

Mary Kingsley declined to take a stand on whether innate racial differences existed beyond the superficial visible ones, saying that science knew too little about race (Kingsley 1899, p. 385). She did believe that African natives and Britons had very different ways of thinking: the British approached phenomena in a materialist way, while Africans viewed causation in more spiritual terms, and this could help explain the societies’ very different relationships to technology (Kingsley 1899, pp. 385–87). It seems unlikely she would have endorsed the period’s hierarchical racial taxonomies purporting to identify “natural” differences in capacities.

Kingsley mocked Britons’ incoherent and self-serving stereotypes of “the African,”

the creature that turns up in mission literature as a Simple Child of Nature, our Unsophisticated Brother, &c., and in newspapers as an Incarnate Fiend wallowing in blood, . . . given to cannibalizing round corners whenever the white eye is off him, and a lazy brute when the white eye is on.

Kingsley 1898a, pp. 538–39

She sometimes overgeneralized about “Africans,” or wrote about them flippantly or condescendingly; but when she was serious, her central message was a plea to her countrymen to try to understand African people’s lives and viewpoints, rather than seeing them as savages who had to be either Europeanized or eliminated.

Flora Shaw Lugard expressed far less criticism of the ideology of racial hierarchy. She explicitly approved the racial division of labor she observed in South Africa’s mining areas, while leaving some ambiguity about its duration:

The native is recognized as the motor power by means of which material development is carried out; the white man takes the position of director of this motor power, which is the only position that he can hold with satisfaction to himself in the African climate. Muscle on the one side and brain on the other must, for a long time to come, represent the respective contributions of the two races to the public stock.

Shaw 1893a, p. 19

“For a long time to come” might suggest that Shaw saw racial differences as related to education rather than immutable characteristics—but this would be small comfort to the generations of black workers who would be confined to South Africa’s worst and most poorly paid jobs.

Some of Shaw's later writings gave considerable attention to race due to her focus on the colonies of tropical Africa. Her 1905 book began by stating "It has become the habit of the British mind to think of the British Empire as a white empire. But, as a matter of fact, we all know that ours is not a white empire." Only an eighth of the empire's inhabitants were white, and unlike the white settler colonies, the non-white territories required governments "more or less in the nature of an autocracy which leaves with the rulers full responsibility for the prosperity of the ruled" (Shaw 1905, p. 1). After governance came the labor question: historically, it was slave labor that had made industrialization possible, and now it would have to be free African labor that developed the tropical colonies. Shaw referred to various "races" throughout the book's historical account, often identifying them as "higher" or "lower," "finer" or "degraded." Similarly, her "British Empire" entry for the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* began with a lengthy inventory of the colonies' populations, classified as white, black, yellow and brown (Shaw 1910–11). One cannot be sure about Shaw's precise understanding of "race"—but she was comfortable using the language of racial hierarchy, and she often expressed a blatantly instrumental view of the empire's people of color.

Morality and empire

Of these authors, only Flora Shaw comes across as a truly orthodox imperialist. Mary Kingsley, whose relationship with Shaw was a frosty one, wrote in an 1899 letter that "She is imbued with the modern form of imperialism. It is her religion" (Helly 2012, p. 110). Shaw herself might not have disagreed. Reflecting on her life in a 1904 letter to her husband, she said she was proud of having "helped to rouse the British public to a sense of Imperial responsibility and an ideal of Imperial greatness." "I never thought of my work exactly as journalism," she wrote, "but rather as active politics without the fame" (Helly and Callaway 2000, p. 50). Writing from Nigeria in 1902, she waxed enthusiastic about "this conception of an Empire which is to secure the ruling of the world by its finest race" (Perham 1960, p. 81).

We can see in Shaw's writings many of the standard justifications of empire:

- Britain liberated the colonies' peoples from oppressive rulers and put an end to the violence that had long plagued them, such as the raiding of villages to capture slaves.
- The natives had been doing very little to develop the rich resources that surrounded them. The British would not leave those resources idle.
- The British sought the betterment (civilization) of their colonial subjects: over time natives' living standards would improve and their ways of life would advance.
- If Britain had not colonized the territories, another European power would have, and the natives would have been much less well-served.

Harriet Martineau voiced some of these same ideas, as we have seen, but she was much more ambivalent about empire. The leading scholar on Martineau calls her "both a cautious advocate and severe critic of British imperialism" (Logan 2009, p. 9). Her hopes for the empire conformed with her period's

ethnocentrism secure in its assumption that western industrial society is unquestionably superior to pre-industrial cultures, and that the benefits of modern technology, political economy and enlightened social philosophy must be desired by, and bestowed upon, those cultures as the ethical realization of the Civilizing Mission.

Logan 2009, p. 13

Although Martineau acknowledged that many injustices and blunders had come with British rule, she believed in the ability of British capital, technological knowledge, and free-market institutions to promote progress and prosperity in the colonies. In time the colonies would become capable of self-government, and then they would (they must) be given their independence.

Mary Kingsley's writing also contained scraps of the conventional language about progress and mutual gain. She was, however, uniquely insistent that change in West Africa must be fully voluntary. She did not trust that the changes brought by colonization would be better for native communities. British rhetoric on the colonies, she said, was mostly "humbug."

[W]e have proclaimed that we are only in Africa for peaceful reasons of commerce, and religion, and education, not with any desire for the African's land or property: that, of course, it is not possible for us to extend our friendship or our toleration to people who go in for cannibalism, slave-raiding, or human sacrifices, but apart from these matters we have no desire to meddle with African domestic affairs, or take away their land.

Kingsley 1899, p. 368

West Africans had begun to see through this pretense, and they were resisting, not out of some irrational hostility but a "reasonable dislike to being dispossessed alike of power and property in what they regard as their own country" (Kingsley 1899, p. 375). The future did not look promising, unless Britain drastically altered its approach.

The desire to develop our West African possessions is a worthy one in its way, but better leave it totally alone than attempt it with your present machinery . . . You have got a grand rich region there, populated by an uncommon fine sort of human being. You have been trying your present set of ideas on it for over 400 years; they have failed in a heart-breaking drizzling sort of way to perform any single solitary one of the things you say you want done there. West Africa to-day is just a quarry of paving-stones for Hell, and those stones were cemented in place with men's blood mixed with wasted gold.

Kingsley 1899, pp. 390–91

We might picture Kingsley as pleading her case from one end of the imperialist spectrum and Shaw campaigning energetically from the other, with Martineau lecturing from somewhere in between. All three women—intellectually gifted, well-informed, prolific, with compelling public personas—helped to shape debate on the empire during Britain's "imperial century." Their skills and dedication made the discussion a richer and more inclusive one.

Notes

- 1 Martineau's writing on political economy was in part inspired by Jane Marcet's 1816 *Conversations on Political Economy* (see Polkinghorn 1995). Two excellent biographies of Martineau are Logan (2002) and Pichanick (1980). Logan (2004) brings together Martineau's most important works on empire.
- 2 As John Stuart Mill put it in 1848, "Of all vulgar modes of escaping from the consideration of the effect of social and moral influences on the human mind, the most vulgar is that of attributing the diversities of conduct and character to inherent natural differences" (Mill 1848, p. 319). Pitts (2005) notes that his repudiation of biological racism did not diminish Mill's support for the rule of the East India Company; she suggests that Mill deployed his concept of "national character" as a similarly problematic justification for British domination.

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