

Anna Winterbottom, Victoria Dickenson, Ben Cartwright and Lauren Williams (editors)

Women, Environment and Networks of Empire: Elizabeth Gwillim and Mary Symonds in Madras

Montreal: McGill University Press, 2023

ISBN 978-0-228-01886-5 \$53.18. 392 pp.

Of the 5000 travel writings published in Britain and Ireland between 1708 and 1804, 204 were authored by women.¹ While published accounts of British women travellers have been the subject of much historical research, the present volume focuses upon the obscure figures of Elizabeth Gwillim and Mary Symonds during their time in Madras (1801–1808), bringing together their unpublished letters and paintings housed at the McGill University, the British Library and the South Asia collection in Norwich. A culmination of the online seminar on the Gwillim Project held throughout the course of 2020, the book is divided into two sections each comprising 5 chapters along with multiple case studies. The volume explores 121 bird watercolours, 31 fish paintings, 12 botanical artworks, 78 pieces depicting landscapes and people in Madras and 78 extensive letters, written by the sisters, between 1801–1808. Interdisciplinary research by the contributors showcases the active participation in nineteenth-century global knowledge networks of the sisters in particular and women in general, despite their exclusion from academic circles and constant denigration by their male counterparts. Drawing upon the rich epistolary and pictorial evidence, the book also provides a commentary on the contemporary social, political, economic, material and environmental history of the period.

In the introduction, Anna Winterbottom describes the book's layout. Rather than presenting a historiographical survey, it sets the context for Elizabeth Gwillim and Mary Symonds' documentation of the natural world and people of Madras, which by the nineteenth century had emerged as a 'regional capital of an imperial power' (p. 12). The first half of the book titled, 'Painting, Collecting and Observing', broadly analyses the significance of the female gaze in documentation of the natural world through painting and consequently the participation of women in the larger imperial project. Ben Cartwright's chapter elucidates the individual style of Mary Symonds. Despite being influenced by a range of contemporary artistic styles, the artworks by the sisters reflected a personal touch, stemming from deep appreciation of the place. In the first case study, Hana Nikčević illustrates how deployment of 'feminine' artistic techniques like paste models and miniatures by Mary Symonds was informed by her position as a middle-class English woman, while also serving as a means to control her vision of the 'chaotic' streets of Madras. Analysis of the ornithological paintings by Suryanarayana Subramanya highlights Elizabeth Gwillim

1. Sutapa Dutta, ed., *British Women Travellers: Empire and Beyond, 1770–1870* (New York: Routledge, 2020), p. 5.

as the earliest documenter of Madras ornithology and a pioneer in bird taxidermy, while also hinting at the existence of a bird trade in Madras and the role of local communities in providing live specimens. Shymal Lakshminarayanan and Hana Nikčević's detailed discussion of ichthyological water colours in the second case study, elucidates the flair of the sisters in documenting the aquatic biodiversity of Kovalam, surpassing their male contemporaries, while also being attentive to the contribution of Indians in European epistemological frameworks. Examining the references to rivers, tanks and aquifers in the Gwillim archive, Vinita Damodaran and Vikram Bhatt provide an environmental history of nineteenth-century Madras. They highlight the indispensability of aquifers in sustaining the agriculture of Madras amidst the unpredictable weather conditions, and the impact of the early British taxation system in exacerbating the situation and pauperising the agrarian communities. Henry Noltie's article uses Elizabeth Gwillim's work to underscore the pivotal role of women in transforming botanical knowledge from leisure to academic discourse. Her pursuit of the 'Hindoo' language enabled her to document local plant uses and engage in a plant transfer network across Madras, Tranquebar and London, supported by local and European experts. Saraphina Masters highlights Elizabeth Gwillim's relative silence about the role of her Indian interlocutors and her acknowledgement of European mentors as outcome of the power dynamics, salient to such projects (p. 157). The role of Indian epistemology in construction of 'European' knowledge of natural history, has been focused upon by Marika Sardar and Abdul Jamil Urfi who also underline the role of colonialism in triumph of 'Western' over 'Oriental' classification systems. The political transitions which maintained earlier artistic traditions also encouraged contributions from amateur painters like the sisters.

The second part of the book titled, 'Social lives, Social Networks and Material Culture' primarily examines the social, cultural and political context of the work of the sisters. Arriving at the cusp of East India Company's expansionist period, Arthur MacGregor showcases the challenges of implementing the rule of law in a colonial context through the life of Henry Gwillim. Examining the sartorial references by the sisters, Toolika Gupta, Alexandra Kim and Ann Wass use their detailed documentation of clothing and apparel of Europeans and Indians in the early nineteenth century to illustrate the role of climate and imperial policies in the changing dynamics of textile trade. The shift from artisanal to machine-made products in Britain extended beyond just clothing. Victoria Dickenson in her case study demonstrates the expanding market of factory-made British porcelain diminishing the market for artisanal Chinese products. Fuelled by the growing propensity to consume tea among English middle class and women in particular, it was also associated with a distinct notion of civility, in contrast to the earthenware or metalware used by Indians Nathalie Cooke traces the history of birth of Anglo-Indian cuisine as envisaged in the letters of the sisters. She contends that the cuisine traversed

REVIEWS

through three stages which entailed shipping of British food items followed by approximating local food variants according to the English palette. This resulted in the formation of a distinct cuisine, epitomised as ‘Curry’. Taking cognisance of the bloody history of colonialism, the author underlines the coercive means by which Indian foodways came to Europe. The non-judgemental method of documentation of the people and practices, particularly the devadasis and maids, by Elizabeth Gwillim, has been lauded by Jeffrey Spears, setting her apart from not only the accounts of contemporary Orientalist men and positivistic accounts of later Victorian period but those by Mary Symonds too. Borrowing Homi Bhaba’s theory of mimicry in the fifth case study, Minakshi Menon focuses upon making of colonial subjectivities, the hidden anxieties of the colonisers, and the precariousness of the empire (p. 272). In the penultimate chapter, Rosemary Raza emphasise the role of British female travellers, including the sisters, in constituting the notion of ‘Britishness’ in a colonial setting. Analysing their accounts, she underlines their engaging and informal writing style as an effective means to convey their personal narrative and disseminate knowledge while being cautious and non-judgemental about political events, like the Vellore Mutiny, due to their distance from official positions (pp. 289–91).

The conclusion, by Anna Winterbottom and Victoria Dickenson, ties the key findings of the chapters with a broader vision of the book, discussing the similarity and differences of the sisters compared to their contemporary male counterparts. Despite its shortcomings, such as repetitive discussions on history of botany and natural science and a lack of comprehensive environmental history barring the fifth article, the book remains a significant contribution to the field of gender, environment and imperial history.

SOHINI DAS

*Jadavpur University & Research Fellow for the Project of History of
Science, The Asiatic Society, Kolkata, West Bengal, India*