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ADDITIONAL NOTES	

# Review of *Genteel Women: Empire and Domestic Material Culture*, by Dianne Lawrence

*Dianne Lawrence. Genteel Women: Empire and Domestic Material Culture, 1840-1910.*

*Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2012. xvii + 262 pp. ISBN: 97802719097362*

*(pbk.). £19.99.*

By Alan Rosenfeld

*Genteel Women* offers its readers a comprehensive exploration of colonial households across the Victorian-era British Empire. Focusing specifically on female gentility, author Dianne Lawrence successfully demonstrates women's agency in the imperial project through the dynamic and continual reinvention of identities in overseas environs. Lawrence should be commended for mining an impressive variety of sources covering a diverse collection of colonial settings. Examples of the former include diaries, letters, photographs, newspapers, shipping inventories, and trade catalogues, all of which in combination allow Lawrence to vividly reconstruct domestic life among British colonial elites in such far-flung locales as North Queensland, Tasmania, Aotearoa/New Zealand, Sierra Leone, and Nigeria as well as Allahabad and Calcutta, India. Rather than organizing her work along geographic constellations, however, the author provides individual chapters examining four loci of the female genteel domestic sphere: women's dress, the living room, the garden, and the dinner table. The result is a rather seamless narrative that highlights the endeavours of genteel women to develop syncretic cultural practices in unfamiliar colonial terrains.

Deploying the theoretical work of Pierre Bourdieu on social capital, taste, and investment, the author stresses the performative nature of gentility and the deep entanglement between performance and identity. Lawrence stresses the precarious position gentility maintained at the top of the social hierarchy (76), a situation that required the constant—and oftentimes imaginative—performance of taste and difference. This dynamic undoubtedly applied even more so in overseas settlements, where genteel women struggled to distinguish themselves not only from the *nouveau riche* of the colonies but also from the native “Other.” Whether it was through enduring the discomfort of corsets in scalding hot weather, engaging in a needlework

project destined for display in the living room, or taking afternoon tea on the visible veranda, genteel women incessantly reinscribed their social positions through deliberate and oftentimes carefully choreographed performances.

Lawrence proves beyond question that the objects of her study were constantly striving to adapt to the unique characteristics of each colonial setting rather than merely ingesting and reproducing the dominant tastes of the metropole. Indeed, the author argues that, “gentility retained its dynamism and social power by absorbing, with suitable discretion, the possibilities of the new” (158). Owing to the drastic differences in climate and the (un)availability of materials, the boundaries of acceptable style in the colonies were clearly more porous and malleable than they had been in Britain. The construction of ant-bed floors in North Queensland—apparently quite common—(92) and the roasting of a stuffed porcupine for dinner in Tasmania (218-219) are two of the more memorable examples that underscore this premise. Indeed, the qualities of ingenuity and industriousness appear to have been highly valued in these settings, as genteel women of the colonies “took pride in their ability to extemporize” (92) while seeking to demonstrate their “abilities to adapt and survive” (189) and thus contribute to the success of the greater imperial mission.

Indeed, not only did the preservation of privileged positions of gentility require a fair measure of industry and diligence, but also—as Lawrence adeptly acknowledges—women consciously emphasized these qualities in their writings as part of an on-going effort to construct themselves as “capable colonizers” (28). This is evident in each of the four facets of the domestic sphere surveyed in the text. Due to the dearth of finished textiles of desirable quality and fashion—as well as the short supply of servant labour in certain colonies—genteel women spent an exorbitant amount of time making and remaking clothing for the entire family. The performance of gentility was hard work—a point that comes alive in Lawrence’s chapter on the living room, “a sphere of feminine authority” where “every detail [was] codified and replete with meanings” (77). The display of needlework and cut flowers was thus not merely decorative in nature but a visible testament to the genteel refinement and productivity of the lady of the house. Similarly, the presence of a piano served as a prominent reminder of one’s European heritage, but playing the piano allowed colonial women to sustain this proud cultural connection while redrawing boundaries between themselves as the native “Other.”

Readers searching for postcolonial critiques of British imperialism or an intricate investigation of cross-cultural interactions will find *Genteel Women* wanting. The violence of the colonial enterprise as experienced by its victims is largely rendered as benign, with the author depicting her subjects as cultural heroines. We encounter Lawrence's genteel women as displaced migrants who overcome their temporary disempowerment to fulfil their destiny as "custodians of the coloniser's more refined social and domestic traditions" and the "gatekeepers for the entry of change" (8). Indigeneity is thus reduced to a state of stagnation and deficiency, and native voice remains just as irrelevant to the readers as it was to the female British settlers annoyed by the "irksome presence of the servant" powering a ceiling fan from the room next door (97). Although Lawrence acknowledges the colonists' theft of indigenous children in Australia, she tempers this with an immediate reference to Aboriginal "attacks on isolated and vulnerable settlers," viewing the on-going conflict as an inevitable outcome of the "vast cultural gulf" (205) that separated the two societies rather than as an interplay between subjugation and resistance. Similarly, while Lawrence recognizes genteel women's contributions to the "global sourcing of plant material" (155) in an effort to "create heavens of loveliness" in their new colonial surroundings (140), she does not address ecological imperialism or the harmful effects of invasive species. There is also a noticeable absence of male voice, the greater inclusion of which would offer a more tangible sense of the ways in which the male gaze both enabled and restricted articulations of femininity and set expectations for genteel women's behaviour.

Overall, these concerns should not detract from the accomplishments of this study, which is tremendously effective in capturing the outlooks and attitudes of genteel women in the British colonies. Lawrence's rigorous research has enabled her to amplify female voice across a spectrum of geographic settings, illuminating women's manifold domestic contributions to the imperial project and blurring the tidy lines between public and private spheres in the process. This text surely warrants consideration for inclusion on reading lists for upper-division and graduate-level course offerings centred on an assortment of themes, including women's history, British history, and European colonial history. In the latter two cases, the ability of *Genteel Women* to highlight women's more subtle participation in the process of empire would undoubtedly work towards harmonizing male-dominated political narratives.