

BOOK REVIEW

Kristin D. Hussey, *Imperial Bodies in London. Empire, Mobility and the Making of British Medicine, 1880-1814* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2021), pp.256, £43.74, hardback, ISBN: 0822946866.

Kristen D. Hussey's *Imperial Bodies in London* is a fascinating study of empire, mobility and imperial medicine in the late nineteenth and early twentieth-century British imperial metropole. The book is pleasingly structured around several important themes, with Part One more explicitly focusing on the body itself and Part Two examining knowledge about those bodies and the imperial networks through which such information flowed. Within this, each of the four substantive chapters is structured around a particular 'organ' – the liver, brain, eye and blood system respectively. Hussey's scholarship is heavily influenced by postcolonial scholarship, 'new imperial' or 'critical colonial' history and historical geography. As such, key elements of these fields – such as putting the metropole and colony in the same analytic frame, close attention to space and place, detailed exploration of questions of race and attention not only to the constructedness of medical knowledge but to the geographical specificities of those forms of 'knowing' – are key premises. In addition to its empirical detail, one of the major contributions of this book is to demonstrate new ways by which the insights of postcolonial scholarship can be creatively applied to the field of British medical history.

An example of the research this book foregrounds can be seen in a brief analysis of Chapter Two: 'The 'Indian Insane's' Brain: Making Sunstroke's Insanity'. This chapter builds on the work of Mark Harrison, Warwick Anderson and others who have interrogated the role that climatic thought played in both accounting for mental distress experienced by white people in colonial spaces and in constructing those racialised identities. Many contemporary accounts of Europeans becoming 'mad' through exposure to tropical climes, both contemporary and historical, have tended to have used the return to the metropole as the end of the story, which was certainly the case with my own thinking about British missionaries who became unwell in India. But, of course, returning to the metropole did not instantly 'rebalance' either minds or bodies. For many, a return 'home' to Britain (sometimes a place from which they had become estranged) was simply the start of another journey in terms of their mental illness. By focussing on London, including 'asylums', Hussey is able to offer a different perspective on the bodies, minds and lives of those labeled the 'Indian insane'. She is also able to shed light on the racialised nature of the attention they received. For example, her discussion of Elizabeth Wright, whose racial status was read as ambivalent, demonstrates how the condition and presentation of those deemed mentally unwell fed into the understanding of liminal categories of race as well as wellbeing.


Another example of Hussey's incisive scholarship, this time taken from the second half of the book, is seen in Chapter Four: 'Something in his Blood', Patrick Manson's Network of Tropical Diseases', which focuses on 'blood'. In part, and in some ways echoing the circulation of blood through a dense network of capillaries, veins and arteries through the body, the chapter demonstrates the dense networks of connection between London and the overseas empire in conveying, accumulating and forging particular kinds of 'knowledge' about the body, disease and difference. At the same time, the chapter is rooted in attention to two specific sites within that imperial metropole: his home at 21 Queen Anne's Street and his consulting practice at Albert Dock and its associated school. This affords attention to a different kind of space, that of the home, the hospital and the school, as sites of exchange.

Because the perspective from which I approach this book is one of a historian of disability in the British Empire, it is perhaps inevitable that one of the questions I must ask of the stories Hussey so intriguingly tells is: what is the place of disability as a way of being or framework of analysis in all this? Disability doesn't seem to have entered the analysis here, but chronic illness, enduring mental illness and serious eye problems might reasonably be conceptualized in this frame. At the same time, I wondered

whether ideas about ‘mobility’, prominent in Hussey’s framing, have, in some respects, resonances of non-disabled ways of being. I do not mean this as a critique of Hussey’s work in particular here, but more generally of the potentially ableist inflections of discussions of ‘mobility studies’ more broadly.

The other question I had about the book is the extent to which ideas about ‘imperial medicine’ were formulated specifically with reference to questions about India. The scope of this book is about the British Empire, and this pan-empire scope is reinforced by the illustrations both on the cover and within, including the famous map of the ‘Imperial Federation’ of 1886 with colonies of the British Empire shaded (in the original) pink. But many of the examples are taken from British India. Again, I do not mean this as a critique – and, I should note they are not exclusively taken from India; it’s just that the Indian experience seems to be emphasized – so much as something I’m interested in. I wondered, for example, how the specifics of vastly different colonial locations might be collapsed and conflated back in the imperial metropole, and how the specificities of various sites of empire might be lost.

These, however, are simply questions inspired by the tremendous work already achieved in Hussey’s fine monograph. It is my belief that the book offers a very useful contribution to a significant number of fields including British History, medical history, postcolonial studies and, indeed, the study of disability.

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doi:10.1017/mdh.2024.12