

# BOOK REVIEW

**Isabel Hofmeyr. *Dockside Reading: Hydrocolonialism and the Custom House*.** Durham: Duke University Press, 2022. xii + 121 pp. Illustrations. Bibliography. Index. \$22.95 Paper. ISBN: 978-1478017745.

One theme that has received limited coverage in studies of the British Empire is the transactions that took place in colonial port cities. As William Beinart and Lotte Hughes have argued in their volume *Environment and Empire* (Oxford University Press, 2009), colonial port cities were unique and important in many ways. They served as centers of extraction, transport, and communication. Plus, maritime transportation was often the cheapest, though not always the fastest, way to transport goods and people. Isabel Hofmeyr, in *Dockside Reading: Hydrocolonialism and the Custom House*, uses the case of the port cities of colonial South Africa to give us a glimpse of the cultures that evolved and the transactions that ensued.

There are four main chapters in this volume, which cover the logistics of labeling cargoes; censorship processes; and the handling of unwanted, counterfeit, and undesirable cargo and people. Books were one of the main items that passed through the ports. These were subjected to two institutions. First, the institution of copyright, focusing on the author and their country of origin, and not necessarily on the main contents. Second, the institution of censorship, whereby customs officials “scanned” through the entire book, attempting to discover offensive material, some of which did not conform to the “Christian values” of the empire (1–4). Hofmeyr adopts both spatial and contextual methods of analyzing the coastal environments and transactions. Customs houses were centers of imperial revenue generation. Port cities connected both the land and the sea, hence the concept of “dockside reading.” “Hydrocolonialism” represents Britain’s colonization of both the land and the sea (4–20).

The concept of “dockside reading” is further subdivided into four components. First, there were “objects,” the main reason (*raison d’être*) for the existence of port cities. Objects determined a port city’s infrastructure and architecture, and different objects also required specialized types of handling. Second, there were also human bodies of all races that passed through the ports. Humans were regarded as transferrable objects, and they were

often identified as “sources of infection.” Hence, other humans were subjected to such processes as fumigation, disinfection, and quarantine. Third, “dockside reading” also involved the handling of books, which were often relegated to the category of “heavy cargo.” During severe storms, books would often be thrown overboard. Those that made it to the ports underwent further classification. “Suspicious and offending volumes” were either returned to their senders or destroyed. Finally, “dockside reading” also posits that customs officials rarely read the books, often treating them as “ordinary cargo” (4–14).

In Chapter One, Hofmeyr relies on the diary entries and notes of a British customs official, George Rutherford. Between 1854 and 1889, Rutherford was posted to work in several port cities in Britain, the West Indies, and Durban, South Africa (29). His notes include information on the roles played by African slaves and Asian indentured laborers, and how these were dispatched to work in the colonial interior. There are also entries on the roles of colonial officials, where custom houses, manned by British officers, served as “legal ports of entry” for various cargoes into the port cities (30–34).

The next chapter continues the focus on life in a small port in the Cape Colony, South Africa. There, we learn that the maritime environment and the objects handled by customs officials shaped and determined the people’s livelihoods, which were often based on the “racial superiority” of the British customs officials. Colonized Africans and Asian indentured laborers did most of the heavy lifting of objects, overseen by the colonial officials, who performed the “clerical” aspects of the work (39–45). We also learn that there were frequently ambiguities regarding what legal regime to use to censor and check the copyright of books coming into the ports. Customs officials were conflicted on whether to use international laws, colonial laws, or British imperial laws. In such cases, the officials relied on “the mark of origin,” where books published in Britain received favoritism, using the Merchandise Marks Act of 1887 (50–55). Hofmeyr argues that there were historical moments and contexts when the numbers of censored and banned books were quite high. For instance, for books going to South Africa from other parts of the empire, there were two peaks in censorship: first, during the Anglo-Boer War of 1899–1902, and second during the 1920s and 1930s, when pro-communist publications were denied entry (66–73). Where books were heavily censored, the customs officials also tore apart their component parts, which in the end significantly altered both notions of authorship and readership. Some books reached their final destination without the author’s name and with some components missing (77–83).

Hofmeyr has produced a remarkable volume combining elements of both historical and “literary” scholarship. It is a must read for those who study English Literature, the British Empire, the history of material culture, and international trade transactions of both human and non-human “cargo.” One notable oversight in this volume, however, is the lack of historical and geographical contextualization in the book’s introductory chapter. The author could have provided a brief overview of the port cities, and also briefly

discussed British colonial intrusion into South Africa during the nineteenth century. That oversight aside, one hopes that students and scholars of empire and imperialism, literature, and international trade will have the opportunity to obtain this volume and use it accordingly.

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