

*Genteel Women: Empire and Domestic Material Culture, 1840–1910*. By Dianne Lawrence. Manchester University Press, Manchester UK, 2012. 262pp. UK price: £65. ISBN 9780719088032 (Hardback).

In her book *Genteel Women*, Dianne Lawrence reflects on the work of white women of empire in fashioning ‘gentility’ in private spaces. These spaces were, she argues, in the various colonial settings described in this book, sites for the performance (but read ‘practice’) of gentility. Rather than being focused on the artifice or symbolic meanings of ‘performance’, Lawrence is more concerned with the lived, daily realities of women’s practices of gentility, and with their agency. She demarcates her work from that of other scholars, including Australian historian Penny Russell, by commenting that the nature of the ‘performance’ of class identity was not merely designed for onlookers or observers, but was instead a set of constantly refined and iterative modes of living indoors (and outdoors) for women migrants. These women’s diaries, letters and other records of their private worlds, from Australia, New Zealand, South Africa, West Africa and India, provide Lawrence with a set of documents about daily life which she reads and interprets through this lens of ‘gentility’.

Gentility itself is defined here as ‘a system of values, a highly nuanced form of knowledge’ (p.3) which was maintained through constant vigilance; enacted; and at risk of dilution. It marked out its practitioners from the ‘vulgar’, and was therefore less a ‘class’ construct than a system of meaning about womanhood, articulated by and among a certain class of women. Class itself is an available category in this book, but is slightly less applicable for Lawrence, who prefers to focus on the idea of ‘practice’, the ‘meticulous attention’ of women to their status (p.3). It is an interesting argument which speaks to other scholarship of the imperial world, such as at least a decade of work about white women as imperial actors, or histories of colonial class, scandal and impropriety, including the work of Kirsten McKenzie.

Lawrence announces her history as different from other studies, though, in her use of material culture as evidence and what she terms ‘its associated practices’ (p.9), which means the way that women made and enacted their own worlds in the colonies in their attempts to maintain specific identities. These, she writes, were not ‘fixed’ but mutable, flexible and influenced by place and context. These women’s lives were shaped through their immigrant status; the book also turns on this idea of these practices being central to the ‘work of migrancy’.

In four substantial chapters, Lawrence shows how women forged their colonial (and imperial) identities through their clothing, living spaces, gardens and household management. Ladies, managing their appearances, were not necessarily ‘fashionable’, a point worth passing on to undergraduate students concerned with histories of dress, ‘fashion’ and dress reform. Instead, appearances were guided by concepts of ‘taste’. The pressing question seems to be how colonial women ‘dressed’ for their various climates – and answers to this abound in the photographs of light, white cotton dresses worn by women in Queensland, and references to the role of the crinoline, which, while restrictive in some respects, reduced the need for petticoats in layers below the skirt, keeping women cooler in summer. Clothing was adapted and modified and items for sewing were commodities prized by genteel women keen to be tidy, presentable ladies whatever the weather. Clothing was also made using materials sourced from world markets and sometimes made by local tailors, as examples from India show, or drapers and dressmakers in white settler colonies. Lawrence is keen to dispel the idea that women gave up the idea of gentility if they lived in remote settlements. Perhaps remoteness was all the more reason for women to practise and maintain their appearances; the evidence is of course selective and partial, as with any study drawn from private writings, but in this chapter these are coupled with records of payment for sewing from family business papers and other sources. Advice manuals, newspaper accounts and museum collections, together with the photographic representations of dress and deportment, build a detailed picture of the performance of gentility through dress,

which was, as Lawrence insists, complex, intense and highly relevant to the new migrants or 'in-comers' to the colonial societies she describes.

Living indoors and managing these spaces was the purview of genteel colonial women. Chapters Three and Five trace the active presence and creation of these spaces by women whose lives revolved around the notions of refinement and appropriate settings for their families, visitors or guests and for their own subjective identification with gentility. Living rooms were carefully appointed, and were, according to Lawrence, 'pivotal spaces' in the work to maintain gentility. Modelled on living rooms 'at home', these spaces were psychologically important and filled with carefully chosen items of furniture and carpets. Domestic goods traversed the world, as illustrated by a table adapted from the *Furniture Gazette* of 1894 (p.87). Imagining how ceiling roses, wallpapers and similar decorative coverings and materials were both imported and made is staggering. Sometimes such rooms in the colonies could take on an 'uneasy' hybrid feel (p.79), and one imagines that the more adventurous of colonial women might have welcomed the opportunity to refashion their interiors in new places. Specific objects, if obtained, such as pianos – as already explored in Kirstine Moffat's detailed study of the piano in New Zealand – lent weight to the pursuit of gentility because of their demand, and their popularity among ladies for entertainment.

Material practices of spatial arrangement and the placement of objects helped to position genteel ladies in relation to domestic servants, including non-white servants, who appear less often in this book than I had anticipated, but who form part of a dialogue about social distinctions and how these too were sometimes blurred – leaving some ambiguity around the way gentility was formed in relation to the 'others' described in passing. In the garden, Lawrence shows, women tackled different aspects of gentility: the work of gardening was productive and responsible, a sign of contributing to the household and home, and also indicating knowledge and education about plants, propagation and newly acquired understandings of colonial gardening habits.

The final chapter considers the underpinning ideas of the 'work of migrancy'. One of the most glaring aspects of the story is the fact that as white women, their gentility was formed against or at least in relation to the non-white inhabitants of lands they had come to occupy and possess as part of the imperial and colonial project. This is the least developed aspect of the book, possibly because, as the comments about domestic service show, the relationships which sprang up between women and servants disrupted gentility and its performance.

At times, I found parts of this book heavy going as a reader. Written partly in the passive voice, especially in the introduction, it seems at times to lack the sharpness of focus it needed to have for its readership. The use of long, wordy quotations as subheadings in the chapters was slightly off-putting for me as a reader because I wanted a crisper organization of ideas and signposting to help me sift through the relevant aspects of sections. The decision to use such quotations was perhaps made to bring the words and voices of the subjects of this history constantly to the fore.

Reading from New Zealand, it is interesting to see the use made of collections of material objects from Te Papa, as well as references to women living in New Zealand whose experiences and worlds bore resemblances to other white women across the colonial worlds examined by Lawrence. Such enterprises are vital to connecting the threads of imperial and colonial histories. By using women and their practices of gentility as a mode of doing so, Lawrence's study refreshes our thinking about the possibilities of such transcolonial histories.

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