

Conference

Gender, War and Culture: From Colonial Conquest, Standing Armies and Revolutionary Wars to the Wars of Nations and Empires (1650s-1910s)

UNC-Chapel Hill • February 20-22, 2014

Part II: Chapter 16

WHITE WARRIORS? IMPERIAL STRUGGLE, RACE AND THE MAKING OF 'WHITE MEN' DURING THE LONG NINETEENTH CENTURY

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The aim: to investigate how gender contributed to the shaping of warfare and military culture and was also transformed by them in the light of the processes of colonization and empire building with particular attention to the 'A' places far beyond the Atlantic world: the Americas, Asia, Africa and Australasia.

A project that will enhance understanding of the entangled relationships between and among gender, warfare and military culture.

Introduction

To consider constructions of manhood in the historical framework of imperialism and colonization is to recognise that in the nineteenth century manhood, like womanhood, was a racialised condition. There were no 'pure' women or men. The meaning of manhood was shaped by its historical context – and the imperial, class, gender and race relations - in which it was forged.¹ In the 19th century, 'manliness' was, as Gail Bederman has argued, increasingly understood in terms of the related concepts of civilization and whiteness: the 'white man' embodied 'civilized manliness'.² The privileged status of 'white manhood' was forged in the racialised contexts of imperial rule.³ But what other understandings of manhood were held, sustained or overcome in subordinated societies? The imperative to defend country? To be free perhaps? In many colonized societies the Indigenous men 'once were warriors' - to cite the title of the enormously popular 1994 New Zealand/Maori feature film.⁴

Constructions of white men

Australians and other white self-governing settler colonists refused to be treated like (other) British colonial subjects. In 1906, Australian leader Alfred Deakin, taking a cue from Australian-born, New Zealand Prime Minister Richard Seddon, pointed out:

Though united in the whole, the Empire is, nevertheless, divided broadly into two parts, one occupied wholly or mainly by a white ruling race, the other principally occupied by coloured races who are ruled. Australia and New Zealand are determined to keep their place in the first class... The ambition of the Australasian States is to keep within the Empire a place parallel and equal to that of the Mother Country.⁵

Australia was governed by a white ruling race and in its imperial ambitions in the Pacific the new Commonwealth looked to emulate the great Anglo-Saxon republic across the Pacific.

White men, by definition, ruled and non-whites were subject to the power of the ruling race. By the end of the 19th century, white men had come to monopolise the status of manhood itself. 'Not-white' men – African American, Australian Aborigines, Asiatics, Pacific Islanders, Indian subjects of the British empire - felt emasculated, robbed of their manhood. Thus did Indian nationalist Lajpat Rai charge that Indian rule was 'sapping our manhood...polluting the very foundations of our manhood' and African American leader WEB DuBois declare that the 'Negro problem of America' was 'whether at last the negro will gain full recognition as a man'.⁶ Or as Aboriginal man Ted Breckenridge told the New South Wales police: 'You rob me of the rights of a man. You rob me of my freedom'.⁷

Constructions of white manhood were shaped by the advent of democracy in North America and Australasia in the 1850s: by the idea that political status inhered not in estate or property or hereditary privilege, but in the condition of manhood itself, an idea expressed in the ideals of manhood suffrage, self-government and self-sovereignty. The advent of democracy worked paradoxically however to exacerbate the divide between men of different races – between white men and 'Asiatics' and whites and 'natives' - as well as between men and women. As Alan Atkinson wrote in *The Europeans in Australia vol.2*, in this context, the Chinaman was considered an 'antitype of masculine virtue even worse than hereditary privilege'.⁸

For a white man to be governed by non-white men meant, as Charles Pearson

argued in his great work of post-colonial prophecy, *National Life and Character: A Forecast*, that 'their pride of place' would be 'humiliated'.⁹ It was this unbearable prospect that provoked white men in the south of the United States to embark on their terrible campaigns of violence and intimidation following Radical Reconstruction. Lynchings peaked in 1892, during Australia's decade of federal constitution-making, when the architects of the constitution gave the federal government the power to expel Pacific Islanders from the new nation. In 1895, Charles Powers, a liberal member of the Queensland Legislative Assembly, an advocate of women's suffrage and future member of the High Court of Australia, was confident of the answer when he asked the colonial parliament: 'Is there a single member who would give votes to aborigines, Japanese, Chinese, Hindus, negroes and South Sea Islanders? I do not think so.'

The mastery of 'savages' through wars of possession and dispossession

In the colonies of settlement the imperialist became a democrat and the democrat an imperialist. Alice Conklin has analysed a similar process with regard to republican imperialism in France during the same period. The key principle that was integral to republican imperial identity, she has suggested, was 'mastery'.¹⁰ As Joan Scott once memorably observed power is constructed in terms of gender and gender in terms of power, but under imperial relations of rule, power was also deeply racialised and based in violence. Natives needed to be brought into subjection, Neil Black, a pastoralist in the colony of Victoria reflected and once 'tamed by means of a few doses of lead' they could be managed by 'threats till they become civilised, but they, like all savages, are treacherous and not much to be trusted'.¹¹ In his account of the making of empire in southern Africa, when nine wars were fought by the Xhosa from 1779 until 1879, first against the Dutch and then the British, Richard Price also points to the role of daily violence – as well as humiliation – in securing imperial rule.¹²

In the self-governing colonies of the British New World, as in the republics of France and the United States, the right to, and capacity for, self-government and the government of others was theorised as a gendered and racialised capacity. As self-disciplined, disinterested, upright, rational persons, white men thought themselves to be naturally - and if Anglo-Saxons, historically - suited to govern themselves and govern others. It was not usually their capacity for violence or military prowess that was invoked to justify their status as self-governing communities or the ruling race, although

Theodore Roosevelt made exactly that argument in his four volume history of the United States, *The Winning of the West*, in which he cast the American frontier as the crucible in which the supremacy of the white race was forged in warfare against savage races. In the next decade Roosevelt welcomed war with Spain as an opportunity to test the nation's manhood and thus its national character.¹³

At the same time, however, in much discourse on manliness, a tendency to violence was associated with weakness, impulsiveness and a lack of discipline, signalling a relapse into barbarism. Ferocity was usually thought to be akin to savagery, as Henry Reynolds noted in his recent history of Aboriginal dispossession in Australia, *Forgotten War*. From the point of view of British imperial officials in Van Diemen's Land:

acts of violence on the part of Natives are generally to be regarded, not as retaliating for any wrongs which they conceived themselves collectively or individually to have endured, but as proceeding from a wanton and savage spirit inherent in them, and impelling them to mischief and cruelty...¹⁴

Violence was necessary to successful colonization, but warfare had to be imagined as honorable – and waged in a just cause according to recognised rules – for it to be seen as compatible with and conducive to manliness. Many white men were ashamed of the extent of violence against Indigenous peoples and worried about its implications.

For violence to be seen as legitimate, manly, and defined as warfare it had to be contextualised by a persuasive narrative. In late 19th century Britain, Heather Streets reminds us, 'tales of army adventures abounded, reflecting an increasingly jingoistic, militaristic and imperially minded popular culture'.¹⁵ Imperial narratives invariably cast rebellious subjects – whether in Queensland, India, Jamaica or the Sudan – as treacherous, cowardly and savage even as white men's constant anxiety and fear of attack unmanned them, leaving them nervous, trembling, and vulnerable, driven to commit their own acts of atrocity and revenge against unpredictable assailants. Even so most imperial officials and colonial settlers, in the French as well as the British empires, comforted themselves that they were bringing the light of civilisation to backward savages.¹⁶

In his account of the *Forgotten War* for control of the Australian continent, Reynolds characterises locally-based Aboriginal resistance to British occupation as a species of 'guerrilla warfare', but such 'guerrilla' tactics, as Paul Kramer points out in his study of Filipino resistance to American occupation did not qualify as 'civilised warfare'. Scattered organization, a lack of apparent hierarchy, 'loosely disciplined troops little distinguishable from savages', 'a reliance on rural supplies little distinguishable from looting', and 'forms of concealment and deception that violated Euro-American standards of masculine honour in combat' all confirmed that Indigenous warriors were neither manly nor honourable.¹⁷ Comparisons of the threats posed by Indigenous insurgents across the British and American empires were common. One besieged settler in north Queensland, for example, remarked in 1885 that 'local blacks were just as difficult ...to deal with as the savage hordes on the Soudan'.¹⁸

Empires were extended and colonial settlement established through violent wars of possession and dispossession, whose questionable morality and legality necessarily entailed processes of disavowal. The campaign of Governor Arthur, a British career soldier, who served as governor of the island of Van Diemen's Land between 1824 and 1836 to drive the Aborigines into captivity was, according to Reynolds, 'by far the largest military operation within Australia in the 19th century', yet Arthur continually regretted the warfare as 'lawless', lamentable and 'cruel'.¹⁹ British colonists, it was acknowledged, were 'intruders' and 'aggressors' in Indigenous people's lands and their imperial 'war of extermination' was hardly a source of manly pride, conducive rather to an uneasy conscience and some feared they were complicit in an 'impending catastrophe'.²⁰

Colonial violence, as Tracey Banivanua-Mar has made clear, was also central to the imperial labour trade that robbed Pacific Islands of a high proportion of their men to sustain the sugar industry in colonial Queensland and Fiji. The violence that occurred on Pacific beaches and Queensland

plantations was intimately connected, as Banivanua-Mar writes, to the ‘concurrent pioneering violence of Australian settler-colonialism’.²¹ Yet the extent of violence has been repressed in historical accounts and the white men who subsequently governed these territories rarely invoked their violent conquest as a justification for their rule. Rather, as in the American conquest of the Philippines, it was their civilised status as white men, whose qualifications for government were assumed to rest in their superior character and mental capacity.²²

Even if they were thought to lack the genius for self-government, men of other races were sometimes hailed, however, as superior fighters and thus as exemplars of masculine heroism. Throughout the nineteenth century, British imperial armies and expeditionary forces brought different imperial ‘races’ to fight together as soldiers, as for example, in response to the Indian Rebellion of 1857, the Sudan in 1885 and the Boxer uprising of 1900. As a consequence, some ethnic/religious groupings – notable Scottish Highlanders, Sikhs and Gurkhas - earned a reputation as ‘martial races’, as Heather Streets has shown in her book of that name. But as she suggested, it was their perceived loyalty to empire, as much as their bravery in battle or capacity for self-sacrifice, that rewarded these groups with the special status of ‘martial races’. Resistance fighters and nationalists fighting for independence were, by contrast, rarely credited with manly courage or patriotism.²³

A willingness to fight for empire, as Streets suggests, was increasingly equated with ideal masculinity in British imperial culture, that celebrated the feats of soldiers fighting on imperial frontiers, such as Gordon of Khartoum, who died defending imperial rule against nationalist insurgents in the Sudan. Military masculinity was not hegemonic, however, in the self-governing colonies of Australia, Canada and New Zealand, or even in the United States, where a capacity for citizenship and self-government – and indeed whiteness itself - was still considered the highest masculine virtue, invoked as the ground for excluding racially undesirable immigrants as potential citizens.²⁴ Though the white Dominions of the British Empire achieved nationhood in political negotiations during the relative peace that marked the nineteenth century, many still believed that true nationhood could only be proven in war, just as war provided the supreme test of manhood. It was a message that imperial officials were keen to promote.

Testing men and nations

War was of course men’s business. Women were expressly excluded from enlistment in the modern professional armies that came into being in the nineteenth century. Yet just as men were exhorted to prove their manhood in war, it was also recognised that modern warfare destroyed men. I am ‘feeling utterly crushed and unmanned’ wrote an Australian soldier from Gallipoli, in 1915, where he found himself fighting alongside Indian and New Zealand troops for the British empire against Ottoman Turks. The official British reporter Ellis Ashmead-Bartlett was, however, full of praise for the performance of these colonial troops:

In less than a quarter of an hour the Turks were out of their second position, either bayoneted or fleeing...But then the Australians, whose blood was up, instead of entrenching, rushed northwards and eastwards, searching for fresh enemies to bayonet...These raw colonial troops in these desperate hours proved worthy to fight side by side with the heroes of Mons, the Aisne, Ypres and Neuve Chapelle...²⁵

The ultimate defeat of the Allied forces at Gallipoli was transformed by the influential British-Australian correspondent Charles Bean into a narrative of nationalist masculine triumph that centred in:

the mettle of the men themselves. To be the sort of man who would give way when his mates were trusting to his firmness...to live the rest of his life haunted by the knowledge that he had set his hand to a soldier’s task and had lacked the grit to carry it through – that was the prospect which these men could not face. Life was very dear, but life was not worth living unless they could be true to their idea of Australian manhood.²⁶

Nationalist mythologising knew no bounds. In the words of the journal *Lone Hand* 'the Australian comes out of the great war looking the most virile thing on earth':

The tasks other men could not do, he went into with a laugh, and though the laughter died in the bitter strain of the front trenches in the rush across 'no man's land', his achievements remain...Australian manhood is our chief asset'.²⁷

In the context of imperial relations and processes of colonization, military valour was defined in terms of imperial loyalty. Nation-building usually followed suit in commemorating feats of military manhood. The British enemy at Gallipoli, the Turks, who defeated the invading Allied forces, also forged their narrative of nationhood on those battlefields, enshrining the hero of Gallipoli, Turkish officer, Ataturk as the country's national hero and first president. The Turkish nation was also forged however in the expulsion and genocide of Christian Armenians.

But the making of manhood and nationhood rested as ever on disavowal.

¹ Mrinalini Sinha *Colonial Masculinity: The manly Englishman and the effeminate Bengali in the late nineteenth century* Manchester University Press, 1995, p. 7. Many histories of masculinity ignore this constitutive dimension, for example, E Anthony Rotundo *American Manhood: Transformations of Masculinity from the Revolution to the Modern Era* Basic Books, 1993; RW Connell *Masculinities* Allen and Unwin, 1995.

² Gail Bederman *Manliness and Civilization: A Cultural History of Gender and Race in the United States, 1880-1917* University of Chicago, 1995, p. 71.

³ Marilyn Lake and Henry Reynolds *Drawing the Global Colour Line: White Men's Countries and the International Challenge of Racial Equality* Cambridge University Press, 2008.

⁴ 'Once Were Warriors' (1994) based on the 1990 novel by Alan Duff, directed by Lee Tamahori, starring Rena Owen and Temuera Morrison.

⁵ Quoted in Marilyn Lake 'The Gendered and Racialised Self Who Claimed the Right to Self-Government' *Journal and Colonialism and Colonial History* 13,1, Spring 2012. p.17

⁶ Quoted in *Ibid.*, pp. 7, 249-50.

⁷ Quoted in Marilyn Lake *FAITH: Faith Bandler Gentle Activist* Allen and Unwin, Sydney, 2002, p. 74.

⁸ Alan Atkinson *The Europeans in Australia A History* vol.2, Oxford University Press, 2004, p.316.

⁹ Charles Henry Pearson *National Life and Character: A Forecast* Macmillan, London and New York, 1893, pp.

¹⁰ Alice Conklin, "The Civilizing Mission," in eds. Edward Berenson, Vincent Duclert, and Christophe Prochasson *The French Republic: History, values, debates*, (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2011), 173-181, 174.

¹¹ Quoted in Penny Russell *Savage or Civilised? Manners in Colonial Australia* NewSouth, Sydney, 2010. See too Angela Woollacott, 'Frontier violence and settler manhood'. *History Australia* 6,1, 2009.

¹² Richard Price *Making Empire: Colonial Encounters and the Creation of Imperial Rule in Nineteenth-Century Africa* Cambridge University Press, 2008, especially pp. 197-8.

¹³ Bederman *Manliness and Civilization* pp. 170-92; Lake and Reynolds *Drawing the Global Colour Line* pp. 95-113.

¹⁴ Governor of Van Dieman's Land, Sir George Arthur, quoted in Henry Reynolds *Forgotten War* NewSouth Books, 2013, p.102.

¹⁵ *Streets Martial Races* p. 117; Graham Dawson *Soldier Heroes: British Adventure, Empire and the Imagining of Masculinities* Routledge, London, 1994.

¹⁶ On the French 'mission civilisatrice' see Alice L Conklin *A Mission to Civilize: The Republican Idea of Empire in France and West Africa, 1895-1930* Stanford University Press, 1997.

¹⁷ Paul A Kramer *The Blood of Government: Race, Empire, the United States and the Philippines* University of North Carolina Press, Chapel Hill, p. 132.

¹⁸ Ibid. p. 217

¹⁹ Ibid., pp. 60, 69.

²⁰ Ibid., pp. 71, 73.

²¹ Tracey Banivanua-Mar *Violence and Colonial Dialogue: The Australian-Pacific Indentured Labor Trade* University of Hawai'i Press, Honolulu, 2007, p. 7.

²² Kramer *The Blood of Government* pp. 121-4.

²³ Ibid., pp.156-89.

²⁴ Matthew Frye Jacobsen *Whiteness of a Different Colour: European Immigrants and the Alchemy of Race* Harvard University press, 1999; Lake and Reynolds *Drawing the Global Colour Line* pp.62-74.

²⁵ Marilyn Lake, Henry Reynolds, Mark McKenna and Joy Damousi *What's Wrong with Anzac? The Militarisation of Australian History* New South, Sydney, 1910.

²⁶ Ibid., p.2.

²⁷ Quoted in Carmel Shute 'Heroines and heroes: Sexual mythology in Australia 1914-18' in Joy Damousi and Marilyn Lake eds *Gender and War: Australians at War in the Twentieth Century* Cambridge University Press, Melbourne (1995), 2010, p. 37.