H-Net Reviews
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Steven Patterson. *The Cult of Imperial Honor in British India.* New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009. x + 263 pp. $85.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-230-61287-7.

Reviewed by Fiona Mani
Published on H-Albion (January, 2011)
Commissioned by Thomas Hajkowski

A Return to Grand Narratives: The British Imperial Honor Ideal in India

Steven Patterson's *The Cult of Imperial Honor in British India* examines the idea of imperial honor among British residents in India during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. It is a history of political culture rather than one of political history and therefore is part of the "cultural turn" in British imperial history. This work is presumably an outgrowth of the author's dissertation "Tin Gods on Wheels: Gentlemanly Honor and the Imperial Ideal in India." It is commonly assumed, especially in the popular imagination, that the notion of honor has been an important ideal for the British in India, yet this has been the first major systematic historical study of that idea. This book fits in the historical literature on British India by adding to our understanding of the lives and, more important, the mentality of British residents, both civil and military, in India.

Patterson begins with an in-depth definition of the "honor code" in India, which began to crystallize with Crown rule and was a clear rejection of the exploitation of the East India Company. Then he deftly weaves the concept of honor throughout the text, focusing on significant concepts and events in the history of the Raj. In this manner, the book lacks a tightly bound narrative history of the British in India. It was the duty of British men in India to protect and preserve the chaste honor of British women. This was especially important during periods of intense tension, such as the Mutiny and the Amritsar Massacre when obsessions about dishonor to British women by Indian men were brought to the forefront in many British residents' memoirs, diaries, and published books. The "crawling order" instituted after Amritsar by Brigadier-General Reginald Dyer in response to the beating of a British woman by Indians helped emphasize to the British residing in India that Indians had no sense of honor since they attacked women. Not only did this ideal help solidify British residents' masculine prowess, but it resonated with the ideals of empire as well–to serve and protect weak individuals.

The author argues against Thomas Metcalf's assertion that honor for the Raj came from the European medieval era, stating instead that honor was derived from the ancient Romans. The Britons in India were like their ancient Roman counterparts–men who firmly believed in their sense of *imperium*, or the right to rule–as well as their role as *pater familias* or heads of household (extended to mean paternalistic rule of the Indians). Of course, this attachment to the classics was part and parcel of the public school education that most civil servants received. Patterson uses the example of the classical poet Publilius Syrus, who asked "What is left when honor is lost?" (p. 38). He answers that for the British, without honor there was a void, hence empire would have no meaning, no prestige, and most of all no indicator of European superiority. Honor was also tied into the imperial personage in India, which helped mark British identities in India while differentiating them from Britons who resided in Britain. The latter did not understand the imperial ideal of honor, while the former lived by the honor code.

There was a distinct ordering of society in the Raj that reflected patterns of how imperial honor was perceived. Serving the empire was the most honorable function that existed in the imperial hierarchy since it ended the former periods of despotism and hence the Indian Civil Service held the highest place over the military ranks and the "competition *wallahs*" who engaged in commerce. Unlike officers in the military they did not make war and shed blood or exploit the natives by selling them opium, like the "competition *wallahs*" who were popularly regarded as "beggar[s] on horseback" (p. 88). Indians were much lower on the honor scale because they did not govern themselves but were ruled by others. A lack of a sense of liberty, even though that liberty was clearly obstructed, was another part of the contradictions of imperialism. Similarly, the sense of restraint was often intertwined

with a lack of restraint as exemplified in the Amritsar Massacre and countless beatings of servants. Of course, that did not stain a British man's honor or an Indian's because the latter, according to prevalent British strains of thought, was perceived to have none in the first place.

Patterson argues that honor explains the British ethos in India. According to Patterson, honor is the best analytical framework, surpassing the categories of race, gender, and class, but most often intertwining with these concepts. The imperial ideal of honor, both in terms of an individual sense of honor and in terms of rule, was one of the reasons that the British were supposedly superior to the Indians. The individual sense of honor could most often be dissected by studying British/Indian relations. Therefore, one of the strengths of this book is that it expands the fields of race, gender, and class analysis, with which most new imperial historians preoccupy themselves, to a new category that influenced Britons in India. Another marked strength is the sophisticated development of theory that helps build a base for the argument of the book. Patterson does not precisely define honor, which helps demonstrate its complexity, yet several pages are devoted to explaining the concept as a gentlemanly code of conduct, as in dressing in the proper fashion, one of reputation, as in William Delafield Arnold's novel *Oakfield* (1854), and of prestige, as in the end of "pelleting" one another like uncivilized persons, and one of devotion to imperial structures. The end result of course was to have the Indian respect and fight for the British man's honor, as when a colonel's servant named Nuz Mohammed beat another Indian man who dishonored his master's name (p. 187). This event only served to amplify the British resident's honor.

This book has an impressive source base that includes several primary sources and oral interviews in addition to major secondary sources. However, it is quite surprising that the bibliography does not include works that deal with classics and the gentlemanly code in India, such as Chris Hagerman's "Secret Ciphers, Secret Knowledge: The Classics in British India, ca. 1800-1900" (published in *Victorian Newsletter* [2008]), since a significant portion of Patterson's work references the Romans and Greeks without showing how the classics were embedded in the published works of many Britons in India. Another question is why there are so few primary sources on men of the upper class or those who served in high-ranking positions as governor-generals who similarly believed in the honor code. Perhaps yet another puzzling question is why the treatment of British women in the empire has been so miniscule, despite the author's statement that honor was "widely distributed to males and females of most classes" (p. 24). There is however a sprinkling of references to women (pp. 102, 106, 126, 173, 185). The more pertinent question here is how a study of women's perceptions of imperial honor could possibly change and complicate the narrative that is presented in this work. The book lacks illustrations, despite the fact that it is an unconventional history of the Raj which includes discussions of clothing and architecture that supports the author's thesis. Its shortcomings are minor in the midst of the work's importance, which pushes imperial history into a new direction that looks beyond the common analytical categories of race, gender, and class by grasping and defining the essence of the Raj. Overall, this book was a delight to read.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the list discussion logs at:
http://h-net.msu.edu/cgi-bin/logbrowse.pl.

Citation: Fiona Mani. Review of Patterson, Steven, *The Cult of Imperial Honor in British India.* H-Albion, H-Net Reviews. January, 2011.
URL: http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=29514

This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.