

Jeffrey Cox. *The British Missionary Enterprise since 1700.* New York: Routledge, 2008. xii + 315 pp. \$150.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-415-09004-9.



Reviewed by Geordan Hammond

Published on H-Albion (March, 2009)

Commissioned by David S. Karr (Columbia College)

Jeffrey Cox, professor of history at the University of Iowa, is known for his work on secularization in England (*The English Churches in a Secular Society: Lambeth, 1870-1930* [1982]) and his more recent work on colonialism and Christianity in India (*Imperial Fault Lines: Christianity and Colonial Power in India, 1818-1940* [2002]). His latest book draws on this previous work with a focus on the British Protestant missionary movement. From the premise that “British religion experienced a rapid institutional revival in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries” follows the central thesis of Cox’s study of British missions from 1700: missionaries were institution builders (p. 3). The word “enterprise” in the book’s title is more business-like than with which most missionaries would have been comfortable, but Cox is surely correct to draw attention to the fact that missionaries almost inevitably became institution builders (see p. 257). Even “faith-based missions,” such as the China Inland Mission, found it necessary to build institutions.

A key theme that pervades the book is the complex relationship between the British Empire and British missionaries. Indeed, this is a subject that should not be avoided in studies of modern mission history. As Cox points out, this relationship is not just a recent scholarly obsession; it was a topic of debate throughout the period under consideration. Three common strands of interpretation have dominated the historiography: rulers of the empire marginalized missionaries; anti-imperialists have commonly seen missionaries as “instruments of imperial rule”; and supporters of missions have traditionally exalted the male missionary hero (p. 4). Cox wisely avoids these rigid interpretations for a more defensible and nuanced view. He argues that missionaries were neither consistently imperialist nor were they free from the power of British imperialism. By expanding alongside the British Empire, missionaries were complicit in the extension of empire while not necessarily promoting all of the ideological and exploitative facets of empire building. The consensus of British Protestant missionaries

was that the “Empire of Christ could never be identified with the Empire of Britain in the long run, for the Empire of Christ was a multiracial, multinational empire that not only transcended the provisional (if providential) boundaries of the British Empire, but transcended the boundaries of time itself” (p. 14). Andrew Porter in *Religion Versus Empire? British Protestant Missionaries and Overseas Expansion* (2004) has detailed the consistent struggle of missionaries against the ideological and exploitative aspects of the British Empire. This struggle is viewed by Cox as one in which the empire had the upper hand. Like Porter’s seminal analysis, Cox’s overall conclusions on missions and imperialism are balanced and substantiated by a large body of evidence over three centuries.

Whereas many studies of British missionary history have begun with the 1792 publication of William Carey’s famous treatise *An Enquiry into the Obligations of Christians, to use means for the Conversion of the Heathens*, Cox (along with Porter) begins the story with the founding of the Society for the Promotion of Christian Knowledge (1698) and Society for the Propagation of the Gospel (1701). This approach enriches our understanding of the origins of British missionary activity and allows for comparison between early British missionary work with Indians and Africans in North America and the West Indies and later developments in Africa, India, and China.

Part 1 of the book outlines what Cox calls an eighteenth-century “confessional improvisation” (the title of chapter 1) through which the Church of England adapted itself to the realities of the British Empire. In chapter 2, “Voluntarist Improvisation,” he examines the work of Evangelicals in expanding the sphere of missionary work beyond the established church. While this characterization is generally true in the case of Nonconformists, the separation of confessional and evangelical missions is too dichotomized. The common

anachronistic mistake that John Wesley was “the head of a new religious denomination, Methodism” is repeated by Cox (p. 51). Part 2 explores the expansion of the movement from 1800-70 with chapters on early failures, the home base, missionary literature, and the missionary hero and missionary institutions. Part 3 deals with the imperial high noon, 1870-1945. Mission institutions are the overriding theme of the three chapters in this section. Part 4 addresses postcolonial missions since 1945 under the theme of Evangelicals and unreached peoples.

One of the strengths of Cox’s study is his recognition of the importance of women and non-Western people to the missionary enterprise. He rightly argues that although missionary literature emphasized the male missionary hero, a considerable majority of British missionaries were women. Given that existing historical records often obscure this fact, Cox has done important work to provide estimates of female contribution where this is omitted from the records of missionary societies and raises the issue for the reader when evidence does not allow for a reassessment. Cox addresses the even more difficult problem of assessing the non-Western involvement in Western missionary work. What is clear is that in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, non-Western staff made up over 80 percent of the missionary workforce and were integral to the building of missionary institutions (see table 1 in the appendix). The institution building of British missionaries could not have proceeded on such a large scale without a significant level of non-Western support.

Cox’s emphasis on the centrality of non-Western participation in the British missionary enterprise is enhanced by his critical engagement with cultural studies of empire, such as the work of Jean and John Comaroff and Catherine Hall who have tended to see relationships between missionaries and local people in negative terms. Cox shows that these relationships were complex and

often formed and sustained on the basis of mutual respect.

The volume benefits from a nine-page appendix of informative statistical charts and graphs on mission income, number of British missionaries abroad (male and female with estimates of non-Western staff), and size of British Protestant missionary societies. The book also contains an index, short bibliography for further reading, and a bibliography relating to the references made in the endnotes, but no overall concluding chapter. A cursory glance through the latter bibliography reveals that the study is based largely on printed books. Little use is made of manuscript materials and missionary magazines. The placement of endnotes at the end of the book makes it cumbersome to trace the sources while reading the book. Historians of mission will likely conclude that the value of the book is decreased by the lack of thorough and consistent referencing. This, however, will be of less concern to nonspecialists.

The incredibly high price of the volume will probably prevent it from being used as a textbook for courses on mission history and deter many readers and scholars alike from purchasing it. Nonetheless, this book fills a gap in the historiography of mission history by providing a one-volume history of modern British missions. The relevance of Cox's study is increased by the substantial global impact of missionary activity and the continuing worldwide influence of Christianity. This work deserves a place on the shelves of university libraries and should be consulted by specialists and readers interested in the history of Christian missions.

with

E

E

E

w

w

w

w

w

w

w

r

f

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at
<https://networks.h-net.org/h-albion>

Citation: Geordan Hammond. Review of Cox, Jeffrey. *The British Missionary Enterprise since 1700*. H-Albion, H-Net Reviews. March, 2009.

URL: <https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=23002>



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