



**James Gregory.** *Mercy and British Culture, 1760-1960.* London: Zed Books, 2021. Illustrations. 288 pp. \$115.00, cloth, ISBN 978-1-350-14258-9.

**Reviewed by** Joanna Bourke (Birkbeck, University of London)

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**Commissioned by** Jeffrey R. Wigelsworth (Red Deer Polytechnic)

What is “mercy”? According to *Bibliotheca Technologica: Or, A Philological Library of Literary Arts and Sciences* (1737), “MERCY is that Affection of *Charity*, which creates in us Pain at the Miseries of others, and whereby we are inclin’d to succour and relieve them.” In contrast, for the 1766 author of *The Art of Knowing Mankind*, it was a “vain ostentation” of “sovereign power,” emanating from their desire to retain power and distribute patronage (p. 3). From the mid-twentieth century, “mercy” was beginning to sound old-fashioned and was gradually overtaken by the rhetoric of “humanitarianism.”

The chief question for this book, therefore, is how can historians identify and account for the complex and unstable meanings of “mercy” over two hundred years? James Gregory takes a pragmatic approach, mining a vast array of primary sources seeking out any mention of the word “mercy.” He is indebted to Raymond Williams’s notion of “keywords,” although he ambitiously extends this to visual images.

Intellectually, Gregory is well placed to write this book. He has immersed himself in the political and cultural history of “mercy” for many years. Just two years ago, he published *The Royal Throne of Mercy and British Culture in the Victorian Age*

(2020), which was a more focused analysis of royal mercy in global contexts during the long nineteenth century. That book was particularly strong on the way Queen Victoria’s responses to colonial rebellions were gendered in newspapers, sermons, popular literature, and visual imagery. This book draws on similar sources but is much broader in its focus. It covers two centuries and explores “mercy” from the perspective of theology, philosophy, imaginative and dramatic literature, art (including sculpture, fresco, and stained glass), colonialist rhetoric, and military propaganda, specifically in Ireland, France, and toward the “vanquished foe” during the First World War.

His two strongest themes are the racialization and gendering of “mercy.” Who possesses the virtue of “mercy”? Since “mercy” was linked to ideas about sensibilities, the “higher” emotions, and social morality, it was given or withheld selectively. In the context of imperialism and colonialism, claims that “savages” were “merciless” were employed as justifications for their brutal suppression and murder. In the words of Henry Rowe Schoolcraft in his 1845 book, *Oneota, or Characteristics of the Red Race of America*, “it was always represented as a meritorious act in old revolutionary reminiscences to have killed one of

them in the border wars and thus aided in ridding the land of a cruel and unnatural race in whom all feelings of pity, justice, and mercy were supposed to be obliterated” (p. 59). Indeed, British imperialists and explorers routinely contended that non-Europeans did not even have a word for “mercy.” In contrast, Englishmen were exemplars of “merciful Christians,” even during their most vicious acts of invasion.

Sitting uneasily alongside this rhetoric of the merciful Englishman was the contention that “mercy” was gendered female. For the philosopher Alexander Bain, British men were “remarkable for [their] strength, superiority, majesty, and sublimity” while their womenfolk personified “Hope, Virtue, Truth, Justice, Mercy, Peace” (p. 121). It was no coincidence that women were prominent founders and members of the animal welfare movements of the nineteenth century. They believed that kindness to animals would act as a catalyst for kindness to female humans since both the happiness of nonhuman animals and human women depended on the “mercy of men.” The “Band of Mercy,” which was established by Catherine Smithies in 1875, preached kindness to animals in the same breath as it promoted other progressive causes, such as vegetarianism and women’s rights. In stark contrast to racists’ views about the cruelty of “savage races,” these proponents of animal welfare believed that the “brute creation” could show mercy. They published accounts of orangutans, dogs, birds, and even ants showing by their actions that they possessed a moral nature which enabled them to both *feel* sympathy and *act* benevolently.

Central to Gregory’s argument is the gradual move of “mercy” from theological and philosophical texts to more secular and populist discourses. He has some insightful concluding words about the late twentieth century. For example, he observes that Margaret Thatcher emphasized the “many deeds of mercy, the myriad acts of human kindness” that *individuals* were capable of, while

repudiating the need for the *state* to show mercy to its more vulnerable members (p. 152).

*Mercy and British Culture* is exhaustive in its scope. This is one of its weaknesses. Readers are bombarded with quotations from primary sources. His “keyword” approach tends toward a wearisome and scattergun repetition of the word “mercy,” which occasionally led me to wonder about the broader contexts of the passages cited. Gregory also claims that he is interested in the ways “mercy” was “embodied,” but it is never clear what he means by this, and there is no suggestion in these pages that he is drawing on any of the major embodiment theorists.

These are small criticisms, however. Gregory has provided his readers with an incredibly researched and powerfully argued book on what remains an elusive concept. It is a book to be savored slowly, providing a historical space to think about compassion today.

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