

Turning a Curse into a Blessing: Propaganda and the Emigration of British Single Women

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History

Surplus, matron, spinster, old maid, redundant: these words referred to the single woman in Victorian and Edwardian Britain. Far from conforming to ideal standards, these women defied British gender categorization. Society scrambled to fix the growing number of single women. Emigration to the colonies offered new options for relocating single women and restoring the gender balance. Yet, emigration to the colonies proved to be a paradoxical option. Emigration resisted oppressive ideals of women, but also redefined single women so they conformed to standard expectations. Newspapers and periodicals assisted in circulating the new definition of single women.¹ Propagandists redefined options for the single woman that allowed her space within the domestic sphere. Instead of being redundant and a burden, propagandists championed single women as proud, valuable British citizens. Feminists entered the emigration debate and made room for single women to explore emigration for their own benefit, not to maintain society's gender hierarchy or serve the empire. In both cases, propaganda identified the single woman as agents of imperialism and expanded concepts of British womanhood.

During the Victorian and Edwardian eras, imperialism dominated British life. It fashioned ideologies that permeated the economic, political and social spheres. Women occupied an ambiguous role in imperial society; "they were the inferior sex within the superior race."² Separate sphere ideology, men in the public and women in the home, did not necessarily create strict gender boundaries in reality, but the separate sphere ideology constructed gender identity and organized people's perceptions about men and women.³ In the nineteenth century, women's

¹ Numerous newspapers and periodicals covered female emigration. One periodical, the *Imperial Colonist*, was a major factor in encouraging female emigration from a feminist perspective. Unable to gain access to this periodical, my paper used other newspapers. For a study on the *Imperial Colonist*, see Lisa Chilton "A New Class of Women for the Colonies: The *Imperial Colonist* and the Construction of Empire," *The Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History* 31; 36 – 56.

² Margaret Strobel, *European Women and The Second British Empire* (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1991), xi.

³ Levine, Philippa. *Victorian Feminism*, (London: Hutchinson, 1987), 12-13.

domestic identity depended on their role as mothers. This ideology resurrected and transformed into a national, imperial duty during the twentieth century.⁴ Their value rested in their biological ability to reproduce and their emotional capacity to nurture. Their role as mothers elevated them to an important standard of upholding British values and spreading British culture by having children and raising them to be proper British citizens.⁵ The premise that, “no colony or country can achieve greatness unless the mothers recognize and are able to fulfill their responsibilities towards their households, their children, and themselves” exemplified British imperial motherhood.⁶ This republican motherhood gave women access to imperialism, but maintained their subordinate position in the gender hierarchy.⁷

Imperial discourse drew heavily on familial language that upheld Britain as the Mother Country to her colonial children.⁸ The power of motherhood in imperial rhetoric further rendered single women powerless. Unmarried, the single woman occupied an ambiguous role: she created a problematic scenario for British society.⁹ The single woman did not meet the traditional standards of British womanhood. She did not contribute to the perpetuation of the British race nor did she fit into the traditional ‘Angel in the House’ role.¹⁰ Women’s duty to Britain concentrated on birthing and building the next generation of British citizens.¹¹ This empowered imperial motherhood; it linked women to the imperial discourse and elevated them to an important role in perpetuating the race and civilization.¹²

⁴ Anne K. Mellor, *Mothers of the Nation Women’s Political Writing in England, 1780 – 1830*. (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2000), 10.

⁵ Anna Davin, “Imperialism and Motherhood” *History Workshop Journal*, 5 (1978); 14 – 15.

⁶ May Hely Hutchinson, “Female Emigration to South Africa” *Nineteenth Century and After: A Monthly Review* January 1902, 73.

⁷ Janet C. Myers, in her article “Performing the Voyage Out: Victorian Female Emigration and the Class Dynamics of Displacement” *Victorian Literature and Culture* 29 (2001); 129 – 146, states republican motherhood “defines women’s place in the nation in terms of their domestic and reproductive roles” (129).

⁸ Julia Bush, *Edwardian Ladies and Imperial Power*, (Leicester: Leicester University Press, 2000), 83.

⁹ Rita Kranidis, “Introduction: New Subjects, Familiar Grounds,” *Imperial Objects*, 4.

¹⁰ Expression used to describe the ideal Victorian woman. She was meek, graceful, submissive, self-sacrificing, pious and pure. The term is taken from Coventry Patmore’s poem, published in 1854, in which he describes his wife, who he held as the ideal woman. In the poem, Patmore presents a paradox: he places his wife on a moral pedestal, superior to himself. Yet, she was expected to wait on her husband and ensure his happiness. In 1931, Virginia Woolf stated that killing the Angel in the House was part of women writers’ job description.

¹¹ Davin, 12 – 13.

¹² The role of mothers was an important ideology that carried over into women’s fight for enfranchisement. Emmeline Pankhurst, cofounder of the Women’s Social and Political Union,

In these two ways, motherhood encompassed biological and racial elements of imperialism. British mothers served the biological need for more children, ultimately more white citizens to become soldiers, mothers and transmitters of British culture.¹³ Racial beliefs that characterized British as superior substantiated the need for more white, British citizens.¹⁴ The emphasis on motherhood allowed female imperialists to stress the differences between men and women as a means to promote their rights and abilities as legitimate British citizens.¹⁵ Men and women had different responsibilities to the empire. Men were the defenders, and women were the caretakers of British ethnicity. Female imperialists used this ideology to define a place within imperial politics.

In addition to its biological and racial importance, motherhood represented a powerful ideal in Victorian and Edwardian times. In terms of the British civilizing mission, Britain represented both the disciplined, rationale father and the loving, nurturing mother. This belief formed the foundation of emigration arguments in British periodicals. “It is intoxicating to read of all England is doing for Africa...Never before in the history of the world, I believe, has so much been done for a conquered nation; all of which goes to prove that the impulse is one of imperious maternity. I like the words imperious maternity much better than imperialism,” claimed contributor Mrs. Chapin in the British periodical *The Imperial Colonist*.¹⁶ Imperious maternity created room for women’s participation in the empire while reinforcing typical ideological beliefs about women’s domestic position in British society. With this statement, Mrs. Chapin made a strong claim that the female identity formed the foundation of imperialism. Imperialism dictated that the superior British care for and civilize the natives. This mirrored the inherent identity of Victorian and Edwardian mothers. Imperialist rhetoric about motherhood tied it explicitly to the civilizing mission. Feminizing imperialism gave women authorized access to the empire. Many female imperialists focused on their colonized female counterparts; it became the white woman’s job to speak for her uncultured, mistreated native sister.¹⁷ In this sense, this rhetoric promoted women’s role as a complement to that of men’s role in imperialism. Women

argued women should have the right to vote precisely because they were mothers and educating the next generation.

¹³ Julia Bush, “Edwardian Ladies and the “race” Dimensions of British Imperialism” 278.

¹⁴ Antoinette Burton, *Burdens of History British Feminists, Indian Women and Imperial Culture, 1865 – 1915*. (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1994), 18.

¹⁵ *Ibid*, 281

¹⁶ *Imperial Colonist*, II (8), August 1903 as quoted in “‘The Right Sort of Woman’: Female Emigrators and Emigration to the British Empire, 1890 – 1910” *Women’s History Review*, 3 (1994).

¹⁷ Antoinette Burton further explains the complications of this ideology in *Burdens of History*.

civilized by mothering, men civilized by disciplining.¹⁸ In order to sustain the empire, both were important. Constructions of gender and the subsequent contributions to imperialism guided the initial reactions to increasing numbers of single women.

The female emigration debate demonstrated the gender problems in Britain. Cultural constructions of gender contributed to women's association in imperialist discourse with motherhood.¹⁹ Because motherhood commanded such a high status, it became a forced, popular belief that women's future was to become a mother. Consequently, the single childless woman lost power in the imperial language connected to motherhood. Single women defied their marital destiny. Unable to provide for themselves, they depended on family for either financial support or to locate employment positions. British society scrambled to define the single woman; she needed her place in the ordered hierarchy. Statistically, single women posed a problem after the 1851 census. Women outnumbered men in Britain, especially in the age category of twenty to thirty.²⁰ According to the 1851 census, there were 650,000 more women than men.²¹ Ten years later, that number grew to 800,000 and by 1911, there were approximately 1.3 million more women than men.²² The fact that single women existed was nothing new to the Victorian era, but the increase in number generated attention and visibility.²³

In one sense, the statistics alleviated blame from single women. Essentially, their single status was not entirely their choice or completely their fault. Instead, unfortunate circumstances constrained their marital prospects. Individuals began to respond to the statistical anomaly and offer solutions. W.R. Greg penned a pamphlet, "Why are Women Redundant?" in 1869 that analyzed the superfluous condition of women. Fully blaming society for the imbalance, because "Nature makes no mistakes and creates no redundancies," Greg bemoaned, "we are

¹⁸ Julia Bush, "'The Right Sort of Woman': Female Emigrators and Emigration to the British Empire, 1890 – 1910," *Women's History Review* 3, (1994); 399. Bush used the term emigrators to describe individuals who assisted British citizens in the emigration process.

¹⁹ Rita Kranidis, "Introduction: New Subjects, Familiar Grounds," 9.

²⁰ Strobel, 25.

²¹ Faymonville, "'Waste Not, Want Not': Even Redundant Women Have Their Uses" in *Imperial Objects*, 65 – 66. This 'surplus' of women had many causes, including a high rate of male infant mortality, war which inflicted great casualties amongst men, and high rates of migration amongst men.

²² Ibid.

²³ Janet C. Myers, "Performing the Voyage Out: Victorian Female Emigration and the Class Dynamics of Displacement" *Victorian Literature and Culture*, (2001); 129; Nan H. Dreher, "Redundancy and Emigration: The 'Woman Question' in Mid-Victorian Britain," *Victorian Periodicals Review* 26 (1993); 4.

disordered, we are suffering, we are astray.”²⁴ Writing that the deviant excess of women denoted “an unwholesome social state, and [was] both productive and prognostic of much wretchedness and wrong,” Greg suggested emigration as a solution to relieve the numerical excess of women.²⁵ He argued that “an immediate result of the removal of 500,000 women from the mother-country, where they are redundant, to the colonies, where they are sorely needed, all who remain home will rise in value.”²⁶ He believed that the high numbers of single men moving to the colonies resulted in the increase in single women in Britain. His proposed form of emigration revolved around the single, female immigrants meeting and marrying their single, immigrant male counterparts.

This statistical problem supplied evidence to an ideological complication caused by single women. They created ambiguity in the rigidly defined British life. Single women did not rightfully belong to any understood Victorian status.²⁷ They challenged the power of marriage, and consequently posed a problem to the patriarchal society. The newly redefined single woman could succeed if she moved to a colony, married a British colonist, and conformed to domestic ideology. An anonymous writer assured the public that single women would not burden society if they were funneled into colonies. This author emphatically reassured readers, “there are too many women in this country. Are they to become a curse instead of a blessing? No, no! a thousand times no! If there are too many here, there is work for them somewhere in the world. There are homes for them to bless in the east and in the west, in the north and in the south!”²⁸ Emigration gave single women the opportunity to find their proper place in society.

Encouraging emigration, propagandists urged single women to believe that Britain’s “superabundant and neglected daughters will find home and happiness in the New World, and the seeming curse will become a real blessing.”²⁹ Women were urgently needed in the colonies because “the future permanence and welfare of the Colonies depend[ed] upon [their] emigration – the men [were] gone, and those who [were] sometimes ironically called their ‘better-halves’ must follow to complete the national as well as the family life of these new countries.”³⁰ Thus, imperial motherhood was defined by single women’s potential to become mothers

²⁴ Greg, “Why Are Women Redundant,” 37, 39.

²⁵ Ibid, 2.

²⁶ Ibid, 38.

²⁷ Rita Kranidis, *The Victorian Spinster and Colonial Emigration Contested Subjects*, (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1999), 5.

²⁸ “Middle Class Female Emigration Impartially Considered” *English Woman’s Journal* October 1, 1862; 73.

²⁹ Ibid, 80.

³⁰ “Emigration” *The Englishwoman’s Year Book and Directory*, 1884, 34.

where mothers were needed most: in the colonies. Accepting the national call to marry in the colonies, the single woman gained an identity. Domestic ideology accepted her role in the gender hierarchy and in imperial politics. She could regain agency through her personal quest to marry. Propaganda in periodicals assisted in the evolving definition of single women.

By exploring opportunities in the colonies, society created an outlet where single women effectively could exist as efficient, worthy British citizens. Propaganda in periodicals circulated this new identity for the single woman which coexisted peacefully with the “Angel in the House.” This new space for single women to exist conformed to national ideology and domesticity ideology while granting opportunity to women to escape spinsterhood. Propaganda in periodicals called for women to recognize the potential in emigration and seek success outside Britain but within the domestic sphere.

When propagandists wrote about life in the colonies, a woman’s worth was relative to her ability to maintain a proper home. Writers touted the potential for domestic-minded women in the colonies: “it seems to me that the secret of a woman’s success in any colony lies simply in her ability to make a home happy and comfortable – not a home such as she may have inhabited [in Britain], but a home where she must be a Jill-of-all-trades, if, alas, it involves her being mistress of none!”³¹ By publicizing the notion that domesticity presented the best method to succeed in the colonies, the domestic ideal of womanhood became the only woman with value in Great Britain and its empire. Furthermore, this statement recognized the marriage possibility in the colonies; the ultimate goal was to become her own mistress in her own home. The options opened to single women were well within the limits of domesticity.

Single women did have another option aside from marriage for a useful life in the colonies: domestic service. Although single, the female domestic servant conformed to British gender standards by taking part in domestic activities. Domestic servants imitated expected responsibilities of British wives and mothers. Emigration propaganda stressed the need for domestic servants, with many articles calling to Britain to “send us women who understand domestic work.”³² Those who excelled at domestic labor met accepted standards and were wanted in the colonies. One author recognized that women began to desert their natural place for the pursuits of men and attempted to rouse honor in female domestic servants,

³¹ Brice, Arthur Montefiore, “Emigration for Gentlewomen” *Nineteenth Century and After*, a *Monthly Review* April, 1901, 601.

³² Mrs. Warner Snoad, “Emigration for Women” *Today’s Woman: A Weekly Home and Fashion Journal*, April 20, 1895, 15.

The tendency of women to desert the needle for the pen, and the kitchen-range for the office desk, is just as marked in the Colonies as in the Mother Country, and consequently the demand in the Colonies is for women trained in 'home craft,' and this training does not usually come under the head of skilled labor, although in truth it calls for the highest possible attainments of sterling womanhood.³³

This quote limited the abilities of women to the domestic and suggested to readers that women who pursued freedom from domesticity would not find success in the colonies. British colonists attempted to mimic British society. In order for that goal to be achieved, domestic women needed to populate the colonies.

A proper British colony required proper British morals. The young, marriageable single woman fit nicely into this equation. In an advertisement soliciting young women to relocate to South Africa, the opening line read,

the emigration of women to South Africa has become a question of national importance. If that country is in the future to become one of the great self-governing colonies of the British Empire, warm in sympathy and attachment to the mother country, it must be peopled with loyal British women as well as British men.³⁴

This quote granted single women access to the biological and racial components of imperial motherhood. It reinforced the belief that single women biologically and racially served Britain's imperial desires in the spirit of true British women.³⁵ The single women upheld her racial duty by providing a suitable alternative to native women for male British colonists. Articles quite plainly announced this purpose, especially in regards to South Africa: "It is as well at once to face the fact that intermarriage of British men with Boer women will never produce [British families.] As a rule the Boer women of South Africa are devoid of many of the qualities which are essential to make a British man's home happy and

³³ F-G, M. "Should Women Emigrate?" *Monthly Review*, May, 1907, 101.

³⁴ Cecil, Alicia M. "The Needs of South Africa," *Nineteenth Century and After, a Monthly Review* April, 1902, 683.

³⁵ Julia Bush, "Edwardian Ladies and the 'Race' Dimensions of British Imperialism" *Women's Studies International Forum*, 21 (1998); 283; Strobel, 26. Strobel also addresses the emphasis on South Africa as a suitable place for surplus women. After the Anglo-Boer War, South Africa became a colony that was a focus of Anglicization. In 1901, the South African Expansion Committee organized and their sole job was to promote single women's emigration to South Africa. Similar needs for domestic servants were publicized.

comfortable.”³⁶ Ideologically, single women committed to the national cause by serving the empire through domestic service or by marriage. While this reinforced women’s subordinate position in society, women rallied around their domestic identity and used their gender to participate in British imperialism.

The emphasis on domestic work and marriage encouraged single women to remain within the domestic sphere. Thus, the perpetuation of distinct gender roles remained a prominent aspect of imperialism; however, women worked within this ideology to foster female imperialism. In order to promote women’s role in the imperial mission, it became important to stress the differences between men and women. Women organized societies devoted to woman’s imperial work.³⁷ Often, women imperialists articulated similar views as men, but generally female imperialist had a different emphasis.³⁸ Women’s imperial organizations fulfilled expected womanly standards by helping children, other women and the natives.³⁹ The majority of women did not challenge the patriarchal empire; instead they located ways in which women’s accommodated the empire. They continued to work within class and gender hierarchies. They did not try and access the imperial agenda through male power, but by the authority of their female identity.

Emigration propaganda, while it produced a space for single women to achieve their destiny and thus a place in British society, also created an opportunity for women to expand opportunities within domestic ideology. Emigration became a reason for women to organize for women’s advancement. While many female imperial organizations did not define themselves as feminist organizations, they nevertheless “powerfully linked to a broader British women’s movement, fed by the mingled currents of feminist equal rights activism and gender-conscious social reform.”⁴⁰ One organization developed a feminist agenda that focused on the needs of women, not the empire. In 1861, Maria Rye opened a law-copying office and advertised for copyists, hoping to employ educated gentlewomen. She was surprised to receive an enormous number of applications; in one instance she received 810 applications for one position that only paid fifteen pounds per year. Unable to assist these women by hiring them all as copyists, Rye privately encouraged them to move to the colonies to find suitable work. She assisted the

³⁶ Cecil, 683.

³⁷ In addition to the Female Middle Class Society, other imperial organizations included the Primrose League, the Victoria League, British Women’s Emigration Society, South African Colonization Society, Society for the Overseas Settlement of British Women. The focus is on the FMCES because they represented a feminist organization and challenge the redefined single woman.

³⁸ Bush, *Edwardian Ladies and Imperial Power*, 81.

³⁹ Ibid, 80.

⁴⁰ Ibid, 175.

emigration of twenty-two educated women by providing loans, safe passage and contacts in the colonies.⁴¹ This success led her to establish the Female Middle Class Emigration Society, or FMCES, in 1862.⁴²

Rye, herself a spinster, recognized the opportunity educated, unmarried women had in the colonies.⁴³ She believed that woman had the ability to change the landscape of the colonies and improve their status in British society;

I would remind all who are hesitating about the advisability of emigration [of the single woman] to remember, that in olden times ten men brought evil tidings of Canaan itself; yet the land was a good land, in spite of the wretched report, and it fared mightily well with those who had courage to march on and possess it. The matter is now virtually in the hands of the women of this country. They must decide their own fate.⁴⁴

Rye located total agency in the single woman. She had to decide her own fate, not necessarily contribute to the greater national cause. The FMCES encouraged the belief that “gentlewomen must...fully understand that they go to work for independence, not to marry, and be idle.”⁴⁵ The organization focused on the improvement of women’s quality of life and status within society. The concerns and needs of the colonies did not factor into the FMCES’ argument for emigration. The FMCES worked specifically for educated, middle class single women within a decidedly feminist agenda.⁴⁶ The FMCES argued the colonies offered women opportunities that would serve short term goals for their improved social and political status.⁴⁷

The FMCES’ feminist agenda informed their approach to promoting emigration. Their major arguments for single, female middle class women to

⁴¹ Hammerton, *Emigrant Gentlewomen*, (Totowa, NJ: Rowman and Littlefield Press, 1979) 127.

⁴² Additionally, Rye independently assisted women of the working class. See Hammerton, “Feminism and Female Emigration” in *A Widening Sphere: Changing Roles of Victorian Women* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1977), 61.

⁴³ For more about Maria Rye’s life and contributions to the women’s movement in Britain, see *Emigration and Empire: The Life of Maria S. Rye* by Marion Diamond.

⁴⁴ Maria Rye, *Times* April 29, 1862.

⁴⁵ “Emigration” *English Women’s Journal*, March 1861, 8.

⁴⁶ This is in contrast with another leader of female emigration, Caroline Chisholm. Mrs. Chisholm was a wife living in the colonies and saw herself as a female imperialist, encouraging women to emigrate in order to serve the country and promote colonization. Many organizations used this rhetoric to encourage British women to seek opportunity in the colonies.

⁴⁷ Marion Diamond, “Maria Rye’s Journey: Metropolitan and Colonial Perceptions of Female Emigration” in *Imperial Objects* ed. Rita Krandsis (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1998), 127-128.

emigrate included gainful employment, a freer life and individual agency. Not only did Rye acknowledge the benefits of emigration, her publications often referenced women's unequal status within the Empire and encouraged women to search for possible alternatives to their constricted life. Regardless, they worked within the bounds of womanhood. Victorian and Edwardian feminists did not attempt to alter gender constructions; instead, they sought to improve women's status by expanding the options open to women using domestic ideology.⁴⁸

Popular advertised employment opportunities in the colonies included openings for nurses, teachers and governesses. Rye wrote, "As to the chances of an efficient teacher obtaining employment, the evidence is so strong as to the certainty of success, that I had almost gone so far as to say, there must be some defect in the mind or morals of a woman long unemployed in the colonies."⁴⁹ Rye also indicated that a significant salary difference between Britain and the colonies yielded a better life for women in the colonies. In a different article, she asserted,

All I can say is this: knowing as I do that while here, with extreme difficulty and great self-denial, really educated women must toil on many, many hours a-day to make 100*l.* a year, and that there, in the colonies, persons who in this country would scarcely be considered competent to conduct the quietest village school are receiving 130*l.* and 124*l.* a-year for salaries as governesses.⁵⁰

Publicizing the promise of ample employment opportunities and high wages, the FMCES made colonial life seem as though it could solve single women's dilemmas in the mother country and give them a better life.

Despite the promise of Rye's assessment, employment in the colonies did not always live up to expected beliefs. At times, women emigrants found limited options for nurses, teachers and other positions for educated women. Ultimately, domestic service proved to be most available option. Openings for domestic servants were well paid and the most advertised.⁵¹ As historian A. James Hammerton wrote, organizations needed to sell domestic service to the educated woman.⁵² Educated women did not want to be domestic servants. Those seeking to

⁴⁸ Levine, 13.

⁴⁹ Maria Rye "Female Middle Class Emigration, A Paper Read at the Meeting of the Association for The Promotion of Social Science" 1862, 25.

⁵⁰ Maria Rye, "To the Editor of the Times" April 29, 1862.

⁵¹ Lisa Chilton, "A New Class of Women for the Colonies: The *Imperial Colonist* and the Construction of Empire" *The Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History*, 31 (2003); 40.

⁵² Hammerton, *Emigrant Gentlewomen*, 34.

employ domestic servants did not want educated women.⁵³ Organizations publicized opinions that encouraged domestic service and elevated it to a highly coveted, proud opportunity.⁵⁴ They used different names to refer to the educated domestic servant, such as lady helps, home helps, and companions.⁵⁵ They described lady servants as highly coveted in the colonies, and propagandists advertised lady helps as occupying positions of honor, not humiliation. In one article, “Ladies As Servants” by a Mistress, the author alleged,

[a lady servant] has sense enough and cultivation enough to realize that there is no disgrace involved in wearing a pretty cap and apron, and that these appurtenances are only the outward and visible signs of an honorable servitude, just as is the uniform of the soldier, sailor, policeman, postman, or the cap and apron of a hospital nurse.⁵⁶

Furthermore, marriage still occupied the highest level of worth in society. Charles Kingsley wrote in *The Times*, “All attempts to employ her in handicraft are but substitutes for that far nobler and more useful work for which Nature intends her—to marry and bear children.”⁵⁷ In order to encourage women to emigrate as domestic servants, propaganda remolded the domestic servant into the educated lady help. Propagandists encouraged the belief that “the feeling of independence which must come from the knowledge that they are worth their salary to their employers” was worth the effort to emigrate, even as domestic servants.⁵⁸ Propaganda redefined the position of domestic servant in order to fit colonial needs and suit educated women’s expectations, at least until they arrived in the colonies.

Problems often occurred with job availability. Australia and New Zealand did not require governesses because most children attended public schools. On one occasion, Rye and the FMCES sent 141 women to Queensland in December 1862. Ninety-six of the 141 were governesses, and the remaining women were domestic servants. These women, unable to find employment, stayed in immigration

⁵³ Chilton, 41.

⁵⁴ Hammerton, *Emigrant Gentlewomen*, Chapter 6

⁵⁵ Strobel, 26.

⁵⁶ A Mistress, “Ladies as Servants” *Woman’s Life* Vol. 21, Issue 272 (Feb. 23 1901); 486

⁵⁷ Charles Kingsley, “Letter to the Editor” *The Times* April 11, 1862; 5.

⁵⁸ Evelyn Wills “Emigration for Women” *Womanhood: the Magazine of Woman’s Progress and Interests, Political, Legal, Social, and Intellectual, and of Health and Beauty Culture*. 1900, 382 – 384.

barracks and depended on the assistance of local charities.⁵⁹ The following year, of the nine governesses sent to Australia, FMCES' records indicate that only three landed paying positions.⁶⁰ Nevertheless, Rye continued to preach the innumerable opportunities afforded to women in the colonies.

Organizations devoted to female emigration offered a clear expression of how women asserted and controlled their identity in the imperial world. Writing against either a discourse that labeled single women superfluous, redundant, and useless, or one which forced single women into the domestic sphere, the FMCES understood that in order to gain funds, they needed to prove single women's value. In doing so, these women directly contradicted the current societal valuation of single woman. Their writings indicated they understood that the gender hierarchy in Britain left women subordinate and weak. They recognized women suffered because they were "over-worked and under-paid"⁶¹ Thus, they turned to emigration not to solve the problems of the Empire, but to assist women by challenging restrictive gender ideology. Rye wrote, "colonization is capable of being effectually worked as a means for improving the condition of women; that the subject has been singularly neglected and overlooked."⁶² This challenge asserted women's value outside of marriage and the ideological constraints of empire. Additionally, other organizations and propagandists recognized the gender inequalities in Britain. Evelyn Willis, in an article encouraging emigration, declared, "All [women's] lives they have been obliged to stand aside, while all that could possibly be squeezed from the family exchequer was expended upon educating the boys and launching them in professions or business careers."⁶³ The FMCES and other feminists promoted the idea that women could work and thrive on their own. They challenged traditional aspects of gender in British society.

The FMCES recognized that colonial life did not suit everyone. The FMCES, along with other emigration organization, promoted emigration of the "right sort of woman"⁶⁴ for two reasons: first, they needed to assure donors that the women emigrating were of quality and worthy of financial assistance, and also because emigrants faced a difficult transition in the colonies and they wanted women to realize the responsibilities attached to emigration. The right woman

⁵⁹ Marion Diamond, "Maria Rye's Journey: Metropolitan and Colonial Perceptions of Female Emigration" in *Imperial Objects Essays on Victorian Women's Emigration and the unauthorized Imperial Experience*, (Totowa, NJ: Twayne Publishers 1998), 131.

⁶⁰ Ibid, 132.

⁶¹ Maria Rye "Female Middle Class Emigration" *The English Woman's Journal* (1862); 21.

⁶² Ibid, 21.

⁶³ Willis, 382.

⁶⁴ Bush, "The Right Sort of Woman: Female Emigrators and Emigration to the British Empire, 1890-1910," 385.

must possess British civility, but also strength of mind and body. The FMCES consciously and explicitly stated, numerous times, that it only sent women who met the high standards of British ethnicity. The FMCES noted that “it is unjust to the colonies, as well as most short-sighted policy on our part, to ship off, as a rule, only the illiterate, the unruly, and the ill-behaved.”⁶⁵ Additionally, “[The FMCES] demand[ed] evidence of sufficient physical capability to endure the hardness of colonial life, and of a moral status likely to withstand the inevitable temptations which surround[ed] a woman placed under such peculiar circumstances.”⁶⁶ Rye ensured potential donors and supporters that the emigration process was selective and only women who could endure the colonial situation passed. Furthermore, the FMCES sought to distinguish its emigrants from lower class emigrants with poor reputations. In a letter to the Editor in *The Times*, Rye wrote “I not only believe, but am confident, that there are vacant situations in the colonies for many hundreds of women vastly superior to the hordes of wild Irish and fast young ladies who have hitherto started as emigrants.”⁶⁷ Rye promoted a positive image of female emigrants, emigrants who deserved the opportunity abroad.

Britain’s patriarchal and hierarchal society necessitated the emigration societies’ moral check. Society believed women, especially servant girls, of lower classes were easily tempted and quick to fall off the right path.⁶⁸ When Rye spoke about female emigration, she stated that the FMCES’ high standards precluded women from workhouses, orphanages, and reformatories because “the temptations to vice are not lessened abroad, all restraint being at once removed, and moreover a false step there can never be retraced.”⁶⁹ When applicants applied for emigration assistance, the FMCES interviewed them to discern character and intent. Women with illegitimate children or lack of references were immediately denied.⁷⁰ The FMCES ensured its venture by carefully selecting worthy applicants.

⁶⁵ Ibid, 21.

⁶⁶ Ibid, 22.

⁶⁷ Rye, “Letter to the Editor” 29 April 1862.

⁶⁸ Julia Bush, in “‘The Right sort of Woman’: Female Emigrators and emigration to the British Empire, 1890 – 1910,” writes that “to be far more prone to kick over the traces both in their work and in their general behaviour” (396).

⁶⁹ Maria Rye, “Female Middle Class Emigration”

⁷⁰ Julia Bush, “‘The Right Sort of Woman’: Female Emigrators and Emigration to the British Empire, 1890 – 1910,” 396. Despite such procedures, there were records of a few fallen women. The South African Colonisation Society, for instance, had individual cases of one woman who was seduced by the ship captain, one woman was pregnant upon arrival, and some who left domestic service to become bar maids. Similarly, Rye noted in letters to the FMCES office that women were most tempted on the ships and some gave into lust when on the ship sailing to the colony.

The FMCES focused on the middle class for specific reasons.⁷¹ Middle class British women were not expected to work, but to pursue lady like endeavors such as sewing.⁷² This definition of women promoted the trope that middle class women were weak, idle and incapable of thriving in the colonies.⁷³ The FMCES challenged this gender trope by asserting that women had the ability to successfully provide for themselves in the colonies. They did not, however, step outside accepted employment for women. They challenged the limitations of the domestic ideology which denied middle class women's capacity to live without the assistance of a husband or father.

Although middle class emigration dominated the headlines, the majority of emigrants actually emerged from the working class. One scholar, Rita Kranidis, suggested that the emigration of working class women had little symbolic value because they did not identify with the goals of empire. These women were not republican mothers. They were not domestic goddesses. Instead, they existed outside the delicate domestic sphere and worked to support themselves and their family.⁷⁴ The "distressed gentlewoman" had a more complicated relationship to the empire.⁷⁵ Cultural expectations and a rigidly defined duty to the empire required attention and care. Single and educated, they were the potential republican mothers in the colonies. Conversely, Kranidis argued that Britain exported what was considered an undesirable category of British society: the unmarried single woman. Well-marketed, demanded, and consumed, Britain exported the redundant single women in order to preserve gender hierarchy.⁷⁶

While the FMCES did not have the funds to assist hundreds of women like larger organizations, it did effectively contest limitations placed on women. Rye left the FMCES in 1865 to pursue other options and Jane Lewin ascended into

⁷¹ Janet C. Myers explores how emigrating women maintained class distinctions on the ships that were taking them to the new colonies in her article, "Performing the Voyage Out: Victorian Female Emigration and the Class Dynamics of Displacement" in *Victorian Literature and Culture* 29, (2001); 129 - 146. These women, despite their class status, were traveling on second class decks due to financial limitations. In order to combat this mixture of classes and maintain their own class distinction, middle class travelers employed certain strategies, including: using a discourse of rights, dress, "portable domesticity, or the replication of British domestic life aboard emigrant ships, and the exercise of strategic amnesia" (130).

⁷² Dreher, 4.

⁷³ Hammerton, 32.

⁷⁴ Kranidis, *The Victorian Spinster and Colonial Emigration Contested Subjects*, 30-31.

⁷⁵ Hammerton uses this term to refer to middle class women emigrants. It encompasses the stereotype of idle, helpless and victimized. A distressed gentlewoman was a lady of middle class social status, however for whatever reason she lacked financial security.

⁷⁶ Kranidis, *The Victorian Spinster and Colonial Emigration Contested Subjects*, 33-35.

leadership.⁷⁷ Lewin continued Rye's work but focused specifically on facilitating the emigration of governesses, not domestic workers. In 1881, Lewin retired and the FMCES returned to a domestic-centered emigration plan.⁷⁸ In 1886, the FMCES joined with the Colonial Emigration Society, a larger organization which used domestic service and marriage to encourage emigration.⁷⁹ In total, from 1862 – 1882, the FMCES assisted 302 women to move abroad, and about 113 reported back to FMCES with mainly positive accounts.⁸⁰ The FMCES contributed to a growing women's movement which proudly stood behind their womanly identity and demanded access to public activities.

Whereas young single women could adapt and conform to changing identities that granted access to emigration, women past the child bearing age were not encouraged to emigrate because they stood outside the imperial agenda. They presented a conundrum for British society, in that their emigration did not serve the empire's interests in the way that young, marriageable, single women's did. Yet, spinsterhood yielded opportunities for women to explore colonial life without the pressures of gender expectations, especially if women lacked financial restrictions. Several spinsters did take advantage of the British colonies by traveling and exploring. Many women even wrote and published memoirs about their travels, including Ella Christie, who along with her sister published *A Long Look at Life by Two Victorians*, Mary Kingsley who published *Travels in West Africa*, Mary Hall's *A Woman's Trek from the Cape to Cairo*, among others.⁸¹

These spinster travelers explored the borders of Britain's class and gender expectations. Often, while exploring the colonies, they studied plants, culture and architecture and recorded their findings in their memoirs. In keeping with imperialist beliefs, spinsters documented colonial life and championed the benefits of British civilization. Gertrude Bell exclaimed, "All over Syria and even in the desert, whenever a man is ground down by injustice or mastered by his own incompetence, he wishes that he were under the rule that has given wealth to Egypt."⁸² Furthermore, in their accounts, they distanced themselves from the women natives and white colonists, assuming a unique position that transcended gender boundaries. For example, Mary Kingsley described a missionary wife as "a perfectly lovely French girl, with a pale transparent skin and the most great dark

⁷⁷ James Hammerton, "Feminism and Female Emigration" In *A Widening Sphere Changing Roles of Victorian Women* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1977); 61 – 62.

⁷⁸ Ibid, 68.

⁷⁹ Ibid, 70.

⁸⁰ Dreher, 5.

⁸¹ Dea Birkett, *Spinsters Abroad Victorian Lady Explorers*, (New York: Basil Blackwell Inc., 1989), 276-285.

⁸² Gertrude Bell, *The Desert and the Sown*, as quoted in Birkett, 175.

eyes, with indescribable charm, grace of manner, and vivacity in conversation,” the perfect Victorian woman.⁸³ Upon their return home, British society relegated them to “lady travelers.”⁸⁴ Intrigued by the exploits of its spinster females, Britain analyzed and contained their adventures in a strictly feminine manner.⁸⁵ Nevertheless, spinster women found agency outside emigration through traveling the colonies and publishing their memoirs.

Women’s emigration societies demonstrated their ability to organize, command public attention and public space. Furthermore, they confronted limiting aspects of gender ideology. Increased attention to middle class emigration changed broad ideas about gender because it permitted middle class single women to work. At a time when gender underwent reexamination, emigration propaganda expanded opportunities for women.⁸⁶ British women carved an active imperial agenda within British society that used familial imperialist rhetoric to assert their positions as women. By creating space in which the unauthorized woman could succeed in the colonies, the single woman could effectively support the imperial mission and challenge the stereotype of redundancy. As domestic ideology became increasingly important to the public sphere and national ideology, lines between the public and private spheres were not as easily drawn.⁸⁷ The ideology of separate spheres remained important in defining men’s access and women’s access to the public sphere.

Imperial motherhood rhetoric, emigration organizations and publications all contested the reality of separate spheres. Women’s private lives were very much a part of their public duty, and their depiction in newspapers as important, defining actors in society achieved public access in a very public way. By commanding a place within British public life, even those who retained the status of mother, challenged domestic ideology even while working within it.⁸⁸ Women redefined expectations and standards, but at the same time upheld ideology that related to domesticity. Consistent with feminist methods in Victorian and Edwardian times, the FMCES provided an excellent understanding of how feminism functioned. Women did not challenge gender constructions; instead, they worked within them, embracing their domestic identity to expand options and elevate their status.⁸⁹

⁸³ Mary Kingsley, as quoted in Birkett, 86. See Birkett, *Spinsters Abroad Victorian Lady Explorers*, for a comprehensive study on spinster lady travelers.

⁸⁴ Ibid, 183.

⁸⁵ Ibid, 189.

⁸⁶ Dreher, 3.

⁸⁷ Mello, 6 – 8.

⁸⁸ Levine, 14.

⁸⁹ Ibid, 13.

Understanding female imperialists' role in empire has become an important lens to understanding gender relations in Victorian and Edwardian Britain as well as empire and decolonization. Women's place within imperial discourse demonstrated the problems of gender within the domestic and national agenda.⁹⁰ British women served their country and assisted in the maintenance and proliferation of British culture. At the time, women's participation was a fundamental element to the national, imperial agenda. Furthermore, women's participation in the imperial mission was an important component to the women's movement in Victorian and Edwardian England. Anti-suffragists and Suffragists united over the issue of single women's emigration because it combined conservative, moral ideals with an assertion of women's place in society.⁹¹ Emigration allowed feminists to create new identities for women that challenged problematic gender boundaries in British society. Additionally, the experience gained in emigration societies contributed to the development of feminist organizations.⁹²

With imperial agency comes historical agency as well. Understanding the imperial mission and its racist tendencies, women were not excused from recent trends within historical scholarship that demonstrate the evils of imperialism. Women did not challenge the imperial mission; they accepted the belief that the British were ethnically superior, and thus embraced their duty to bring civilization to the colonies. By subjugating the colonized, British women ensured their place within the hierarchy remained powerful. Moreover, as historian Antoinette Burton highlighted, by singling out a specific responsibility to the colonized woman, imperial women understood their status in relation to colonized women.⁹³ The implications of women's actions in the colonies and in support of imperialism built upon historical precedents of imperialism and women's participation in developing cultural and political principles. Emigration gave women access to imperialism and opportunity to expand what British womanhood entailed. Women penetrated the mythical manly terrain of imperialism and actively contributed to British understanding of colonial relationships.⁹⁴ The development of emigration societies, growing interest in enfranchisement and increased educational and employment opportunities, intensified feminist tendencies. Attached to imperial discourse, the expansion of single women's identities allowed flexibility in the definition of British womanhood.

⁹⁰Krandis, *The Victorian Spinster and Colonial Emigration Contested Subjects*, 3.

⁹¹Dreher, 4.

⁹²Ibid, 6.

⁹³ Antoinette Burton explains this concept further in *Burdens of History*, using specifically British feminists and Indian women.

⁹⁴ Chilton, 38.

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