

Author: Strong, Rowan

Title: Victorian Christianity & Emigrant Voyages to British Colonies, c. 1840-c. 1914.

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In this well-researched book, Rowan Strong draws on under-utilised chaplaincy records and shipboard diaries to uncover the religious experiences of emigrants during their voyages from British ports to British colonies. The book is a welcome addition to Strong's evolving corpus on religious life – particularly Anglican religious life – in the Victorian British Empire.

Whereas Strong's earlier work, and the work of scholars like Joseph Hardwick, Michael Gladwin and Hilary Carey, documented the contribution of the Anglican clergy and the Church of England's infrastructure – including initiatives like the Colonial Bishops Fund – to the development of a globalized British world, here Strong considers the influence on the Anglosphere of emigrant chaplains, some of whom were volunteers, and the migrants themselves who carried their faith with them when they moved abroad. Strong is eager to consider the nature of grassroots Christianity, as expressed by all classes of British and Irish migrants, as well as the religious professionals who ministered to them. He contends that historians of Britain's nineteenth-century colonies, particularly those of Australia and New Zealand, – for he does not survey the richer Canadian (or South African) scholarship on settler religion – have failed to appreciate the significance in colonial culture of settlers' religious inheritance. Historians have focused on the considerable influence exerted by missionaries but settler faith and the role of religion in colonial public life remain imperfectly understood. While 'domestic' historians of Britain dismissed long ago the argument that Victorian society grew increasingly secularised, historians of the colonial 'periphery' are still

too quick to accept that colonial life was largely faithless. Did emigrants lose their faith on the voyage out? Strong demonstrates convincingly that they did not.

In the first chapter Strong uncovers the life of Anglican chaplains stationed at emigrant depots and ports of embarkation – miserable places where emigrants were in desperate need of social welfare. He discusses the contribution of the chaplaincy to an Anglican ‘imperial network’, a term recently described as overused¹ but Strong’s deployment of it here seems apt. Emigrant chaplains connected the local parish to the port of embarkation, the emigrant ship and the colonial settlement. Strong demonstrates how social capital was exported through this network, bonding, bridging and linking communities together. But does Strong miss an opportunity to discuss the role of parish magazines and their reportage of emigration in the imperial nexus? Next Strong summarises how the clergy understood emigration within their religious worldview, unpacking the justifications for empire discernible in sermons. Strong shows that empire was a vector for the expansion of Christianity; the clergy were driven by the belief in a providential mission to Christianise the entire globe and imperialism was implicitly sanctioned. In the remaining four chapters Strong describes in rich detail the heterogeneity of the ‘floating village’ – the migrant ship where Britons (and others) of all religious stripes were forced to live together for up to four months. The emigrant ship, Strong suggests, was British society in concentrated microcosm where social and religious tensions were amplified. Strong documents the multiplicity of denominations on board – Anglicans, Presbyterians, Baptists, Methodists, Catholics, Swedenborgians, Jews and others – uncovering the aggressions, misunderstandings and moments of empathy and tolerance experienced by emigrants when they encountered each other’s rituals and rites. Strong

¹ H.M. Carey and C. Barr, ‘Introduction: Religion and Greater Ireland’ in H.M. Carey and C. Barr (eds.), *Religion and Greater Ireland: Christianity and Irish Global Networks, 1750-1969* (Montreal/Kingston: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2015), p. 11.

apportions chapters to steerage emigrants, cabin passengers and religious professionals, analysing class and gender dynamics. His last chapter assesses voyages in the age of steam, tracking continuities and changes in devotion and identities.

Strong's book confirms several theses about Victorian British religion. His analysis of shipboard diaries provides new evidence of Anglicanism's shift from national church to one denomination among many – albeit an assertive denomination which retained privileges – as the Church's relationship with the state became less close. The book shows the growing self-confidence of Catholicism within Britain, as demonstrated by the devotion and Ultramontanist of some of the ship's passengers. The book further reveals the enduring potency of anti-catholicism in British society, as evidenced by the dispute at the Liverpool depot (pp. 49-54) and the multiple antagonistic encounters between Protestant and Catholic passengers. Indeed, Strong shows that while to some extent Victorian Christianity was characterised by ecumenism, the religious landscape remained riven by sectarian rivalry: between Christians and non-Christians; between Protestants and Catholics; between Anglicanism and Nonconformity; and within Anglicanism or Presbyterianism itself. Identities across Britain's four nations were denominational rather than national – religion, it has been argued recently, was the 'primary marker of identity' until the beginning of the twentieth century;² although, as Strong suggests in this book, denominational identities could be regionally and linguistically specific. The Evangelical Presbyterianism of a Free Church of Scotland adherent in the Shetland Isles was different to the Evangelicalism of someone from Wales.

² C. Kidd, 'Union and the Ironies of Displacement in Scottish Literature' in G. Carruthers and C. Kidd (eds.), *Literature and Union: Scottish Texts, British Contexts* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), pp. 28-29.

Anglicanism is dominant in this book which is unsurprising given Strong's expertise and the preponderance of Anglicans in the sources. Nevertheless, at certain points in the text, acknowledgement of the richness of Scottish dissent (beyond the Free Church and Episcopalian Church) and the specificity of the Scottish context would have rendered the discussion more nuanced – i.e. at page 36 on parish administration where the Scottish Kirk's role is not considered; and at page 169 where the discussion on the New Poor Law makes no mention of the separate poor law for Scotland, passed in 1845.

Overall Strong's book demonstrates the usefulness of the sources he has unearthed – the untapped chaplaincy records and the shipboard diaries – which have been systematically assessed to reveal new evidence on the place of religion in British society, in Britain's colonies, and in the liminal space in between – the melting pot of the emigrant ship where the intensity of the environment threw social tensions into relief. The book sheds new light on the centrality of faith to the lives of would-be settlers. Unfortunately, however, our journey ends at the dock. We are left wondering as to whether on-board encounters sharpened religious identities on the ground or fostered cohesion in colonial societies after the emigrants disembarked and became settlers. How did denominationalism and sectarianism shape colonial society? We will have to wait for the next book to find out.

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