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Book Review

Michelle Gordon, *Extreme Violence and the 'British Way': Colonial Warfare in Perak, Sierra Leone, and Sudan*. London: Bloomsbury Academic 2021. Pp. 258. $139 (hardback).

Was there such a thing as a "British way" in colonial warfare? To Michelle Gordon, the answer is a resounding yes. In her book, *Extreme Violence and the 'British Way': Colonial Warfare in Perak, Sierra Leone, and Sudan*, Gordon examines three cases of colonial violence: the Perak War in Malaya (1875–76), the Hutt Tax War in Sierra Leone (1898–99), and the Anglo-Egyptian War of Reconquest in Sudan (1896–99). Given that all these instances of colonial violence occurred in the latter quarter of the nineteenth century, Gordon analyzes them together to draw more general conclusions about colonial violence in the British colonial world. These "small wars" are meant to highlight the ubiquity of violence in British colonial contexts; by focusing on these lesser-known cases, Gordon wants to convey that violence permeated every aspect of the British Empire. Thus, the purpose of this book is to "write violence back into the history of the British Empire" (1). This goal is important and necessary given how popular depictions of British imperialism often downplay the extent to which the empire was an endeavor steeped in violence. However, professional historians have long demonstrated that violence was central to both establishing and maintaining the British Empire. In this sense, *Extreme Violence and the 'British Way'* is less original than the book purports to be; rather than arguing for the novelty of the book's approach, Gordon might instead have framed this book as a contribution to a growing body of literature that centers colonial violence and takes seriously the degree to which the British Empire was predicated on, and maintained by, violence.

A core part of Gordon's argument is that nineteenth century colonial violence was a precursor to the explosive violence of the twentieth century—that the violence of colonialism came home to roost in the next century (220). Especially, Gordon is concerned with explaining that the extremities of colonial violence laid the groundwork

for the genocides of the twentieth century. This argument is also not necessarily new, as others—notably, Isabel Hull—have demonstrated how colonial policy and military tactics shaped later European violence. Gordon's contribution to this literature is to include British colonialism and colonial violence into this conversation. In doing so, Gordon refutes the narrative that the British Empire was somehow less violent or more liberatory than its European peers. Again, this is a valiant and worthwhile endeavor given the recent celebratory accounts of the British Empire, which have erupted during and after the Brexit campaign. However, by seeking to relate nineteenth century colonial violence to later episodes of mass genocidal violence, Gordon downplays the significance of the case studies that she examines in this book. Historians need not peer backwards from the unimaginable atrocities of the twentieth century to justify studying nineteenth century violence, which is a subject worthy of historical research in its own right.

Extreme Violence and the 'British Way' really shines in its analysis of the three conflicts that it uses as case studies. By showing how extreme violence linked each individual war, Gordon explains how these seemingly disparate examples were in fact representative of a larger tendency within British colonial governance and colonial actions. In each case, British racial prejudice, notions of British superiority, and belief in the ultimate boons of British imperialism and the civilizing mission justified the use of extreme violence. For example, in the so-called "Hut Tax" rebellion that broke out in Sierra Leone in early 1898, a Lieutenant C. Braithwaite Wallis presented British reprisals and crackdowns as a necessary corrective to maintain British power in the colony. To Braithwaite, British violence against the Indigenous population was defensible because British rule could end the bloody intertribal wars, the "superstition" that captivated the Indigenous people, and the "tyranny of the chiefs" (118). From this point of view, British rule theoretically stabilized the colony, despite the reality that British rule was upheld only through excessive force and extreme violence. Because the British portrayed such conflicts as a "moral duty" against "inferior" and "uncivilized" peoples, they fabricated the justification for the use of extreme force in suppressing rebellion, enforcing British dominance, and bringing European order to colonial contexts. This is not to say that extreme violence was uncontroversial, however. Often, men on the spot clashed with the Colonial Office over official policy and the escalation of violence. Though she notes that the Colonial Office favored a more "moderate" approach of colonial control compared to the leaders and authorities actually embedded in colonial contexts, Gordon also shows that extreme violence often proceeded with "little action from London" because "the main objective remained the maintenance and expansion of the British Empire" (305). Thus, though the Colonial Office and Parliamentary figures might have preached a softer and less violent approach, the prerogative of the same officials was the exercise of colonial control and the perpetuation of the British Empire.

Gordon's book is a valuable addition to the robust literature about colonial violence insofar as it shows how the British were constantly ready to use extreme violence to defend the interests of the British Empire, advance personal ambition, or maintain control over Indigenous peoples. By expertly showing how extreme violence—which occurred often outside of the control of the central imperial government yet was also frequently unpunished—linked together these three case studies, Gordon generates intriguing questions about the broader role of extreme violence to maintaining British colonialism. Though this reviewer was less convinced by some aspects of Gordon's interventions, the book nevertheless is a well-researched, compelling, and necessary analysis of British violence.

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