Stice on Maguire, 'Contact Zones of the First World War: Cultural Encounters across the British Empire'

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In recent years, the world aspect of the First World War has been among the most fascinating to historians. Since the centennial of the conflict, there have been a number of books that have greatly enhanced our understanding of its global and imperial nature. In particular, non-European voices have been centered in many historical narratives, capturing perspectives long overlooked. Anna Maguire’s Contact Zones of the First World War contributes to this growing body of literature by exploring war-generated “cultural encounters across the British Empire,” with a focus on the experiences of soldiers and laborers from New Zealand, South Africa, and the West Indies.

The choice of subjects is a clear strength of Contact Zones of the First World War. Focusing on participants from New Zealand, South Africa, and the West Indies brings new voices into the conversation, including the Māori. Much of the time, historical attempts to explore imperial aspects of the war center on the same groups that were the subject of so much press attention during the war, soldiers from India and the tirailleur sénégalais. Participants from New Zealand, South Africa, and the West Indies are also perfect for Maguire’s goal of examining relationships within the British Empire and differences in identity and experience. By comparing the experiences of white and nonwhite colonials, this book helps to illuminate aspects of British wartime imperial culture.

The “contact zones” of the book’s title provide the settings for Maguire’s analysis. The war brought a very diverse group of people into contact in particular spaces. Maguire explains that contact zones provided “an extraordinary opportunity for individuals to elaborate upon and confront the givens of colonialism and experience the ‘realities’ of the empire in its later stages outside of their home environments” (p. 4). Maguire has focused on contact zones that allowed for “intimate” encounters, that intimacy being determined chiefly by proximity, and exploring “forms of interaction through proximity that both disenchant the colonial encounter and acknowledge the potential for connection” (p. 10). After establishing contexts, Contact Zones of the First World War examines wartime journeys, camps, leave, life behind the front lines, medical wards, and wartime legacies. The book reminds us that the experience of war extended far beyond the battlefield, and many of the significant cultural exchanges occurred away from shellfire.

Contact Zones is positioned at the crossroads of the Great War and imperial culture. In the opening chapter, Maguire asserts that life in the British Empire meant a considerable amount of exposure to
imperial culture. She writes that “understanding life in the colonies and dominions before the First World War means acknowledging the infusion of imperial thought and images into the lives of children and teenagers” (p. 18). From school curriculum to street names to juvenile literature, people in all parts of the world grew up “under the Union Jack.” According to Maguire, what binds her subjects together was that “their peripheral upbringing on the frontiers rather than in the centre moderated privileges of ethnicity or class despite their imbrication in the cultures of colonialism” (p. 40). This shared prewar experience is the foundation for comparing their wartime experiences.

Contact Zones faces some challenges simply from the nature of its subject. There are not equal amounts of sources for New Zealand, South Africa, and the British West Indies. For some groups, very few sources exist at all. Only in the past year did an English version of Bakary Diallo’s war memoir—one of the only war memoirs by an African—become widely available, in White War, Black Soldiers. And soldiers did not always address directly the subjects that most intrigue the researcher. Some of the most “intimate” experiences from contact zones were not contained in letters home or were present only in discreet allusions. However, the uneven availability of sources reinforces many of Maguire’s arguments about different perceptions of different colonial soldiers.

One very interesting inclusion in Contact Zones is the chapter on sea crossings. There are many history books that explore wartime trench culture, leisure activities, and life behind the front lines. However, wartime journeys have not been widely explored. Yet they are a distinct feature of the colonial experience for those who traveled to the war from imperial peripheries. And Maguire makes a strong case that they were significant contact zones that “forced the men to engage with their fellow travellers and understand their collective identity through intercultural encounters, rituals and practices” (p. 41). Troopships also exposed soldiers to naval culture in interesting ways. Indeed, there is much more room in the history of the Great War for the exploration of exchanges between different military cultures during the war.

In Contact Zones, Maguire puts a significant emphasis on sex. Not only is it an intimate activity, but it is a field in which the borders between self and others are actively and widely policed, often externally. It is also an activity associated with war service, through leave and cross-cultural encounters, since time immemorial. In this book, Maguire analyzes wartime sex to better understand soldiers’ practices of leave and leisure, including practices of tourism in London and Egypt. These leisure practices alongside interactions with nurses together help demonstrate the existing racial hierarchies in the British Empire, and Egypt, and the kinds of connections and consequences that could occur from sexual encounters during the war. While the British government actively discouraged interracial relationships, white colonial troops found a new world of relationships open to them and, to some extent, encouraged. The Māori were perceived quite differently from African laborers. These findings are not altogether unprecedented, but they help round out our understanding of wartime interactions and racial hierarchies.

One area of the book which could be strengthened is the exploration of prewar imperial culture. The presence of prewar imperial images and ideas is, to some extent, undeniably obvious and it is clearly one reason for wartime voluntarism. However, to what extent did it apply equally to all of the men Maguire writes about? And how much of that imperial culture was absorbed rather than resisted? Maguire does use narratives and secondary literature to demonstrate the existence of prewar imperial culture, but more information on which men in the various forces and units would have been
more or less exposed would have been helpful. The assertion about exposure to imperial culture does
not affect the communicating of soldiers’ experiences, but it does shape the analysis of their
experiences, including their expectations of London, the idea of which Maguire suggests was “woven
into their colonial consciousness” (p. 106). To return to an earlier quote, Maguire writes that her
subjects shared “imbrication in the cultures of colonialism” (p. 40). A more thorough discussion of
“imbrication” would have been helpful, even if a full explanation would require a book of its own.

*Contact Zones of the First World War* is well written and highly readable. Maguire has done an
excellent job in her selection of excerpts from autobiographical sources. The passages quoted from
soldiers are vivid and engaging. This book is of interest to anyone who studies the imperial aspects of
the Great War and could easily be integrated into a classroom setting. It is one of very few books that
seek to consider the experiences of the British West Indies Regiment or the Māori among those of
other soldiers. With its descriptions of leave, leisure activities, and cultural practices, it is also
relevant to those who study cultural history or have an interest in aspects of the war away from the
battlefield.

In the closing paragraph, Maguire writes about “the power of war memory for the self-esteem and
sense of belonging for young people of colour and the desire to mitigate pernicious, everyday acts of
racism and xenophobia” as “critical to our understandings and involvement as historians in this
commemoration” (p. 193). Works like this go a long way to remind readers of the diversity of wartime
participants and the dignity of those who served. The war’s centennial moved the historical
conversation forward in very productive ways. Now that it has become more common for historians to
include a broader range of voices in the narrative, the stage has also been set for a broader range of
questions about the experiences and understandings of troops from the imperial periphery.

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