

# H-Diplo

## H-Diplo Article Reviews

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**Joy Schulz. "Birthing Empire: Economies of Childrearing and the Formation of American Colonialism in Hawai'i, 1820-1848." *Diplomatic History* 38:5 (November 2014): 895-925. DOI: 10.1093/dh/dht108. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1093/dh/dht108>**

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In the 1820s and 1830s, American foreign missionaries began encountering a new problem: babies. This natural result of the employment of mostly young married couples in the mission field raised new concerns for missionary parents. How could they provide for their children's future? Educational and economic concerns consumed missionary parents, to say nothing of worries about civilization, race, and the potential effects of growing up in 'heathen lands.' The questions of childrearing accordingly became an important factor in missionary encounters, ultimately shaping the ways that Americans built their empire in Hawai'i, as Joy Schulz reveals in her article.

American missionaries were an important part of the nineteenth century American entrance into Hawai'i. Here, Schulz takes a close and intimate view to consider how having children affected the ways that missionaries navigated the tricky terrain of religious, political, and economic duties in the foreign-mission field.

One of the most intriguing parts of the essay is its exploration of the ways in which the mechanics of mission worked—the methods of payment to missionaries, for example—structured political and economic life on the Islands. There is very little in the article on the religious work of missionaries, but a great deal of careful attention to the other side of the business of missions. Initially, missionaries were paid out of a common-stock system. Individual missionaries did not receive salaries; food was prepared and served for a common table. When all seven of the wives from the initial group of missionaries became pregnant within the first year or so of their time at the mission, this arrangement began to seem problematic. Mothers and fathers began to complain and to request that the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions (ABCFM) create new arrangements for their families. They were particularly concerned about their inability to secure future opportunities for their children, and at first joined with other ABCFM

missionaries around the world in asking the Board to make it possible for their children to return to the U.S. for their education.

For the vast majority of mission children, though, this was not a possibility. Returning to the United States was extremely difficult. In part this was due to the Board's reluctance to support the measure, but in part it came down to parental preferences. Particularly once conditions in Hawai'i seemed to change for the better (in the view of the missionaries), and in response to changing ideas about motherhood that emphasized the importance of children being with their mothers, missionary parents chose to keep their children with them. Schulz's discussion of this change of heart is fascinating, drawing attention not only to the expected changes, such as the constitution of 1840 that missionaries had helped to draft with reference to biblical law, but also the unexpected but crucial changes in demographics on the islands. More whites were arriving through immigration, and more Hawai'ians were dying due to foreign diseases. For missionary parents, Schulz tells us, this meant that they were able to imagine a future for their children on the islands in a way that was impossible in the 1820s. This is remarkable, and serves as an important example of the ways in which some missionaries thought about race, civilization, and colonization. Schulz argues that missionaries did not participate in settler colonialism, but this moment in history, in which the removal of native Hawai'ians through death opened up the possibility for future residence of missionaries and their progeny on Hawai'ian lands, is compelling.

With mission children continuing at Hawai'i, the Board did make some changes in the 1840s. Parents built a new school for their children to attend, and appointed two newly arrived missionaries to serve as its teachers (thus shifting their focus from the Hawai'ians to the white children of missionaries). The Board began paying individual missionaries set salaries, and in 1848 even allowed them to purchase private property. All of the mission lands, previously owned by the Board, would now be transferred to the hands of individual missionary families. Missionaries were from then on to be supported by their Hawai'ian congregations. This is important. The stated goal of all American foreign missions was precisely to create native congregations that would be able to support their own churches and ministers. However, the plan for all of the Board's missions was for them to be staffed by native preachers.<sup>1</sup> The Hawai'ian case is different in its continual employment of white American preachers in this phase. The American Board might have backed off from its formal connection to Hawai'i as a mission station, but the churches continued to be staffed by American missionaries. Schulz does not push this point as fully as she might have, though she does provide an important quotation from Rufus Anderson, the Board's director at the time. Warning the missionaries not to move too far away from their original plans, he warned them that the Board did not want "to change this mission into a mere secular community, into a *colony*" (915, emphasis in original).

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<sup>1</sup> William Hutchison, *Errand to the World: American Protestant Thought and Foreign Missions* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987), ch. 3.

Anderson made this complaint precisely because that is what the mission was starting to look like.

To describe these dynamics that had shaped the Hawaiʻian mission over these decades, Schulz introduces a new term: “familial colonialism” (896). The phrase very nicely gets at what she wants to draw our attention to here: the ways that family (and particularly parental) considerations shaped the ways that American missionaries colonized Hawaiʻi. But it is accordingly a very specific term, useful to explain the dynamics in Hawaiʻi but raising questions about American missionary, colonial, and imperial dynamics elsewhere in the world. Schulz rejects the use of ‘colonialism’ (without the “familial” qualifier) and ‘imperialism’ to describe what these missionaries were up to, even as she explains that ultimately their work on Hawaiʻi was essential to the building of U.S. empire.

This terminology question deserves our close attention, especially as we as a field are not at all in agreement about the proper ways to describe what was happening when the United States encountered foreign peoples, governments, and economies. Was (is?) the United States an empire? If so, how do we chronologically define that empire? In what ways was it similar to and different from other empires? These are some of the major questions that historians of the U.S. in the World are trying to answer, and we are coming up with many different responses. For the antebellum period that Schulz is describing, the terminology is particularly fraught. The use of empire and colonialism to describe the American experience before 1898 is becoming more common, yet still seems to demand caution and explanation.

Hawaiʻi presents a very interesting case in this conversation. American encounters with the Islands as a foreign space began with Captain James Cook’s explorations in the 1770s and end with statehood in 1959. In the almost two centuries in between, Americans were present on the Islands as sailors, merchants, beachcombers, and missionaries. In the century before 1898, Americans frequently served as advisors to the Hawaiʻian government. They owned land in Hawaiʻi. Eventually, they would encourage Hawaiʻian annexation to the United States. These were not agents of the U.S. government, as Schulz points out, but they were important “as purveyors of informal U.S. power” (895). Like Liberia, then, Hawaiʻi presents us with a nineteenth century foreign space in which to think about the nature of American colonialism and imperialism.

In light of that, it makes sense to find a phrase that specifically articulates the particular dynamic that was occurring in the time and place that one is discussing. I wonder, though, if Schulz is selling short what the article is really showing here. Colonialism may be, as she describes it, an “imprecise term for describing the nineteenth-century expansion of American merchants and missionaries into the Pacific” (895), but by following her story through to the end of the century and focusing on these familial dynamics, Schulz’s article shows us American colonialism in the Pacific. The “familial” qualifier might be too narrow in this case. Once we are in the second generation, something more is going on.

'Imperial' is, of course, the other word that one might adopt to describe the missionary encounter in Hawai'i as part of the creation of an American empire. Schulz rejects this term as well, explaining that the role of religion in the islands made the word inappropriate. She writes that the importance of religion as a "fundamental category for exploring U.S. involvement with foreign populations" makes imperialism, "albeit cultural or economic... as unsatisfying a term as colonialism for explaining the formation of a U.S. empire which included territorial colonies by the twentieth century, as well as a moralizing agenda for their governance" (896). This puzzles me in light of the ways that the literature on empire frequently understands religion to be a key component of imperialism. I am not sure why Schulz suggests that religion's significance to the involvement of the U.S. in foreign relations necessarily makes imperialism a less useful term.<sup>2</sup> If we follow Paul Kramer's suggestion to think about the imperial as "a dimension of power in which asymmetries in the scale of political action, regimes of spatial ordering, and modes of exceptionalizing difference enable and produce relations of hierarchy, discipline, dispossession, extraction, and exploitation," then the term's applicability to this case is clear.<sup>3</sup> Indeed, the content of Schulz's article is itself an example of the ways that religion can often be a key part of imperial processes.

The story, of course, does not end in the 1840s. The children that the missionary parents were so concerned about grew up, and they too played very important roles in colonization in Hawai'i. It is in this part of the article that Schulz's insistence on the unsuitability of 'colonialism' in favor of 'familial colonialism' feels limited. Colonialism might be less precise, but its expansiveness would be useful for the larger story that her multi-generational story tells. By tracing this story over generations (the essay covers far more chronology than the 1820-1848 periodization listed in the title suggests), we are able to see the ways in which pragmatic decisions made in the 1840s about missionary personnel would eventually shape the perspectives of the descendants of that personnel during discussions of annexation at the turn of the century. Adult missionary children were almost unanimous in their support of annexation, Schulz tells us. By virtue of their Hawai'ian birth and the policies and decisions of the American Board and their missionary parents, they were by the 1890s placed in influential roles within the Hawai'ian government and so uniquely positioned to facilitate the annexation of Hawai'i into the American empire. Schulz's article tells the story of those policies and decisions, illuminating the important ways that the intimate can affect the diplomatic.

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<sup>2</sup> Indeed, religion has been a key concept for understanding the British Empire. David Chidester's recent work is a particularly useful study of the role of religion—in this case, the study of religion—as a tool of empire. David Chidester, *Empire of Religion: Imperialism and Comparative Religion* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2014).

<sup>3</sup> Paul Kramer, "Power and Connection: Imperial Histories of the United States in the World," *American Historical Review* (December, 2011), 1349.

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A comparative framework would be interesting here. Familial colonialism did not emerge everywhere. After all, American missionaries were not only going to Hawai'i in these years. And the Hawai'ian missionaries were not the only ones having children. If, as Schulz suggests, having children changed the ways that missionaries approached their project, making land acquisition a higher priority and thus altering the course of American diplomatic history in Hawai'i, why did this not happen elsewhere? Missionaries in Ceylon, for example, were very concerned about their children, though this led them to push the mission Board to accept the return of their children to the United States for their education (as Schulz discusses, 901-904). The American Board, in contrast, had hoped that missionary children would remain in South Asia, learning Asian languages and be poised to enter China whenever it would be opened to large-scale evangelization. But these parents did not have the change of heart that Hawai'ian parents did. Child-rearing was accordingly a concern everywhere that missionaries went, and everywhere intersected with diplomatic issues of different types. Schulz has shown that these every-day and intimate realities of missionary parents' lives could have profound effects on the practice of colonialism. It would be interesting to learn what such inquiries could tell us about other places. Schulz's discussion of Hawai'i opens the door for a very exciting avenue of comparative study in which we might ask what issues determined the ways that missionary parents approached questions of family and diplomacy.

This is a great time to be a reader interested in the history of missions in Hawai'i, particularly if one is interested in gender, the family, and intimate forms of empire. Not only do we have Joy Schulz's article, but we also have Jennifer Thigpen's recent book *Island Queens and Mission Wives: How Gender and Empire Remade Hawai'i's Pacific World*.<sup>4</sup> We should think about these two pieces together not only because of the proximity of their publication, but because of the different ways that they challenge us to think about American empire-making. Both focus on the same group of American missionaries to Hawai'i in the nineteenth century, and yet they give us very different, if related, stories about the ways that missionaries took part in diplomatic and colonial dynamics. These excellent publications are a great sign of the vitality of this field right now, and suggest an exciting future for studies that continue these discussions of American empire in the nineteenth century.

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<sup>4</sup> Jennifer Thigpen, *Island Queens and Mission Wives: How Gender and Empire Remade Hawai'i's Pacific World* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2014).

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*Supplement to the Dictionary of American History*. She received her Ph.D. from Harvard University.

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