

## BOOK REVIEW

***Agents of Empire: British Female Migration to Canada and Australia, 1860s – 1930.***

Lisa Chilton. Toronto, Ontario: University of Toronto Press, 2007; illustrations; viii + 240 pages; ISBN 978-0-8020-9474-2; \$27.95 (paper).

Studies of the British Empire have resulted in a generous literature in the past decade. Lisa Chilton's book is an important addition to this historiography. Applying a nuanced reading to the records of British female emigration societies, private organizations, and government bodies, Chilton provides readers with a multi-faceted understanding of the agency of emigrators and emigrants – the agents of empire. Through her analysis of the emigrators – women who directed emigration in Britain, the matrons who accompanied emigrants, and the female reception workers who welcomed emigrants to the far reaches of empire – and emigrants Chilton draws four inter-related conclusions. She argues that upper- and middle-class British women sought to transform female migration by empowering themselves. As "avid and effective self-promoters" (14), the emigrators exploited fears and concerns about female migration to situate themselves as the heroes of carefully-crafted and widely-circulated "safe-passage narratives," securing respectability and power for themselves and their work. Chilton points out that while the success of the narratives is debatable, the success of the emigrators is not. Their success went far beyond the mere number of emigrants they sent to Australia and Canada. In chapters that consider emigrators' attempts to alter the portrayal of domestic service work as a viable 'career path' for middle-class women and the efforts of women in the dominions to wrest control of reception work from local men and from women in Britain, Chilton insightfully demonstrates how female emigrators manoeuvred themselves into positions of power and transformed female migration. The gains made by emigrators in the late nineteenth century were undermined in the years after WWI when female-controlled voluntary agencies were amalgamated and taken over by the state.

One of Chilton's most interesting arguments is that the empowerment of the emigrators came at the expense of the emigrants – the very women the agents relied on for their success. In an intricate dance of power and agency, the emigrators needed to empower emigrants to leave Britain at the same time they had to make them dependent on the work of the emigration agencies. How did emigrants respond to this? Chilton's careful reading of emigrants' "letters home" – problematic in that they were "solicited, selected, and edited by the emigrators" (98) – gives her some entrée into the emigrant experience. She contends that emigrants were also agents, effectively using various strategies to maximize their own experience and relating to the emigrators on their own terms. Unfortunately, since the aboriginal inhabitants of Canada and Australia are absent from the emigration societies' records, they rarely appear in this book. Nonetheless, Chilton's work is an

important contribution to understanding the agency of the empire's women in managing perceptions of gender and class.

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