This diverse collection of articles brings together two historiographical traditions that are enjoying a well-deserved renaissance: imperial history and biography. The book includes stories from around the globe, considering the life careers of subjects active in the British Empire between the late eighteenth century and the Great War. Those examined include such intriguing characters as Mary Seacole, a Jamaican Creole woman who offered her services as a medical practitioner during the Crimean War; Scottish poet and South African public servant Charles Murray; the wide-ranging and sometimes provocative imperial governor, Sir John Pope Hennessy; and, among numerous others, the influential writer on nineteenth-century political economy, Harriet Martineau. As such, this compilation of essays would nicely answer the purpose of those seeking a lively reader to introduce students to a range of imperial topics at once. The thematic and geographic base is broad.

One of the best aspects of this collection is its introduction: editors David Lambert and Alan Lester provide a useful survey both of some of the key historiographical trends in recent studies of the British Empire and of scholarly debates about biographical writing. The notes and suggestions for further reading will help to equip those who would like to explore further the thematic and theoretical developments they have addressed. It seems almost to be part of the criteria of really excellent books—they will prompt us to list excitedly what we would like to read next. While acknowledging disapproval of the “biographical fallacy” by those engaged in new forms of literary criticism, and the need for a more self-conscious approach, Lambert and Lester insist upon the value of biography as a prism or kaleidoscope through which to view history and as a means...
of captivating attention in a larger subject. The editors have also introduced some unifying elements into what is, in some respects, a disparate collection: each piece is accompanied by an illustration of its subject and a map showing the areas of the empire, and larger world, where his or her story was played out.

Catherine Hall’s final chapter on Harriet Martineau also functions as a kind of epilogue. It revisits some of the key ideas and subjects the collected volume has explored and touches upon Hall’s own earlier incursions into the pivotal nineteenth-century controversy over Jamaican governor Edward Eyre. The digression is arguably relevant to the larger topic, although the reader is left wondering, after several pages, what has become of Martineau, the chapter’s putative subject. Patience is ultimately rewarded: Hall does, at last, turn to a thoughtful and engaging account of the life of the intriguing Martineau.

The subjects considered represent a wide sampling of the imperial range. Matthew Brown’s article on Gregor MacGregor, the Scottish conquistador and coloniser whose exploits spanned British, French, and Spanish outposts in the Caribbean, demonstrates how a single life can provide a key to unlock those histories usually compartmentalized into discrete nationally-defined studies. Lives that do not fit within the usual tidy parameters will typically be overlooked or distorted, yet can offer opportunities for a more nuanced understanding of events. The editors’ own piece on Methodist missionary William Shrewsbury functions in a similar way; it reveals how one person can be linked to topics widely separated in space and time, and can embody apparently paradoxical historical strains. In this instance, Shrewsbury was caught up in a dangerous clash with Barbados slave owners in the 1820s because of his humanitarianism, yet later won notoriety for his proposal of draconian measures against the Xhosa at Cape Colony.

The other pieces also afford an opportunity to reflect on larger themes. Anna Johnston’s fascinating article on another imperial evangelist, the London Missionary Society’s Lancelot Edward Threlkeld, expands on some of her earlier work. She uses Threlkeld’s
life to explore the concept of “time” as a point of cultural conflict between missionaries and their Pacific island converts. Moreover, Threlkeld is central to Australia’s contemporary “history wars,” the lively high-stakes controversy over native-newcomer encounters sparked by Keith Windschuttle’s criticisms of what some have called “black armband history.” Among the contributions offered by Johnston’s intelligent and balanced analysis is a warning about careful handling of textual sources, and especially a warning to avoid the tempting trap of “slippage” into lazy speculation, the assigning of intent to one’s subject, the assertion of how he “must” have felt. Biographers, who almost inevitably come to feel a degree of intimate knowledge of their subjects, might be especially prone to this danger. While the narrative literary style of biography contains an echo of fiction, we must remember the distinction.

Migration historian Laurence Brown is able to use the career of imperial governor Sir Arthur Gordon as a lens through which to view the larger question of the movement of indentured labour throughout the empire. It is less certain, however, if Brown’s distinction between professional colonial governor and aristocratic amateur stands up to scrutiny. Brown suggests that the professional careerist would be more apt to bend to the will of the elite in the colonies than would an independent paternalist aristocrat. Such a dichotomy overlooks the fact that the metropolitan Colonial Office, and not the colonial legislatures, held the key to future appointments. Then, too, aristocratic status was in itself no guarantee of financial independence. Indeed, many aristocratic governors sought colonial appointments for pecuniary reasons, even if the financial demands of their rank often meant that the rewards were illusory.

Jonathan Hyslop’s excellent study of the poet and public servant Charles Murray provides an essential window into the question of Scottish national identity in the larger imperial context. Zoë Laidlaw, whose recent work Colonial Connections, 1815-1845 was an ambitious consideration of broad personal networks of patronage throughout the empire, here considers the career of Sir Richard Bourke. While other scholars have considered the migration
of ideas from Bourke’s Cape Colony posting to his administration at New South Wales, Laidlaw argues that Bourke’s primary identity as an Irish liberal offers a more promising avenue for analysis, one that goes beyond the nation-focused histories of those places where Bourke served as governor.

Leigh Dale’s study of the imperial career of Sir George Grey, while certainly valuable, does oversimplify some prevailing ideas of empire held by Grey’s metropolitan contemporaries. The idea of integrating colonised people into the colonialist economy was hardly radical, nor should the insinuation that “extermination” was the usual proposed alternative be permitted to pass unchallenged.

While the subjects are all historical ones, this is an interdisciplinary collection, encompassing the insights of geography, literature, and cultural studies. For the most part, it is refreshingly free of the kind of exclusionary jargon that can so often rob such subjects of their vitality and lively interest. We do, regrettably, read that a nineteenth-century observer of Mary Seacole’s adventure in the Crimea “refer[red] to the codification of colonial intimacy via shifting conceptualisations of identity and difference” (179-80) and that Seacole’s “diasporic identity is produced via a set of complex relational dynamics associated with her cross-continen
tal mobility,” (179-80) but these are rare lapses in an otherwise fine essay, and fine collection.

Perhaps one more petty grievance might be aired: the growing trend toward the informal use of first names in academic writing. It is a habit that we struggle to discourage in undergraduates, and one that, troublingly, is most apt to crop up when the biographical subject is female. Once we are out of the realm of her childhood, “Ishbel” should be accorded the dignity of the title of “Lady Aberdeen.” Likewise, it jars to hear the vicereine of India referred to as “Mary” rather than Lady Curzon, although, in this instance, the author similarly offends, and indeed errs, in calling Lord Curzon “George.” Why not resist the trend toward this minor vulgarity and give our students better examples to follow?
This small point notwithstanding, Colonial Lives amply demonstrates what biography at its best can do: provide a window into larger subjects and themes, readable and compelling human-sized history.

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