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Imperial Lives:

Confronting the Legacies of Empire, Disability and the Victorians

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This chapter explores the life histories of three deaf men and women from nineteenth-century Britain : John Kitto (1804-1854), George Tait (1828-1904) and Jane Groom (1839-1918), who all can, in some ways, be said to have lived imperial lives. John Kitto, from Plymouth, started work as a missionary in Malta, and later travelled to Baghdad where he wrote several texts in the 'Orientalist' vein. George Tait, born in the Scottish Highlands, became a Canadian settler, and set up the first school for the deaf in Halifax, Nova Scotia. And Jane Groom, originally from Shropshire, tried to establish a 'deaf colony' in Canada using the 1872 Homestead Act, which directly dispossessed First Nations people to secure land. As the lives of these three individuals intersected with the workings of the British Empire, this gives us an opportunity to consider the intersection between disability and colonialism more broadly.

Scholars of disability have often used the language of colonialism to evoke the exclusion, discrimination and subjugation of disabled people by society. In 1977, T. Szasz used the expression 'psychiatric slavery' to sum up the containment of mental health patients in American institutions: a stark image suggestive of violence, forced labour and alienation as well as 'unfreedom.'[1] More recently, Karen Hirsch, writing of the historical treatment of disabled people in the USA, has used the language of colonialism to describe a past where disabled people were treated as second class citizens.[2] Meanwhile, Goggin and Newell have discussed the situation of disabled people in contemporary Australia as being one of 'apartheid,' not least due to the elements of social segregation, political isolation and economic marginalisation at stake.[3] A similar tactic has been to deploy the language of race, intimately bound up, as race is, with processes of colonialism and imperialism, to suggest the way in which disabled people have been, and continue to be, stigmatised. Leonard Kreigal most famously made this case when he discussed 'the cripple as Negro' in British and American fiction.[4] While these arguments have been made of a range of physical and mental disabilities, the construction of disabled people as 'colonised' has perhaps been made most strongly by Deaf activists and scholars. Harlan Lane, among others, has used the parity between the suppression of sign language and the suppression of indigenous spoken languages to claim members of Deaf cultures as a linguistic and cultural minority suffering the 'physical

subjugation of a disempowered people, the imposition of alien language and mores, and the regulation of education on behalf of the colonizer's goals'.[5]

The use of colonial, postcolonial and racial imagery by disabled activists and scholars has been important in helping us to understand the dire treatment of disabled people and the multiple layers at which the subordination of disabled people has occurred. It is not simply that disabled people have been stigmatised or unable to work because of the social response to impairment; rather, an ableist agenda has constructed them as utterly 'other' where discrimination has become systematic.[6] This has made the tools provided by postcolonial studies scholars to explore the concept of alterity, highly important in helping to examine the construction of disability. As I have argued elsewhere, the construction of the colonial 'other' and the demarcation of those deemed to be 'disabled' were not only parallel developments, but related ones.[7] In the nineteenth century, as both the languages of 'race' and the languages of 'disability' hardened, the construction of each category of difference became interrelated: they were part and parcel of the same discursive process.

However, an overly simplistic use of postcolonial imagery to convey, explain and evoke disability does have significant limitations. For one thing, it is potentially reductive and distortive. Disabled people and people of colour may both have been subordinated by the major European empires, at home and overseas, but the methods in which each was marginalised from an able, white, society were very different and had very different consequences for each. Furthermore, as Mark Sherry has argued, there is the danger that analytically conflating these two categories of difference not only confuses, but actually obscures the history of both disabled people and people who were colonised.[8] One history that it marginalises in particular, is that of disabled people who might have identified themselves, or been identified by others, as colonisers. In nineteenth-century Britain, when the British empire was a huge part of British society, culture, politics and economics, it may well have been that imperialism shaped the lives of disabled people as colonisers, as well as people who we might argue were also colonised.

In this chapter, I ask whether disabled people themselves participated in colonial practices? It would be surprising if they did not. In the nineteenth century, perceived racial difference was used to justify the transatlantic slave trade, the expropriation of indigenous land across Australasia, Africa and the Americas, and violence of genocidal proportion in Tasmania. The colonial 'other' became a subject of ethnographic examination, pseudo-scientific

investigation, literary curiosity, political subjugation, economic exploitation, Christianising mission and philanthropic crusade. Imperialism infiltrated British culture in complex and manifold ways from high politics, to education, to literature. Suffusing British culture as it did, imperialism brought with it increased sensitivity to questions of race, nationhood and belonging - at home as well as overseas.[9] While different social groups had different levels of involvement in the Britain Empire, an argument has been made that imperialism affected all men and women back in metropolitan Britain whether that was in forging the iron shackles that bound the enslaved, weaving cotton exported by the East India Company, or eating the sugar grown on West Indian plantations .

The aim of this chapter is certainly not to condemn Kitto, Tait and Groom by naming them as 'imperialists' and consigning them to a 'dirty' past. Nor is the aim to claim that they, in many ways extraordinary individuals, were representative of all deaf and/or disabled people. The point is simply to think about what happens to our ideas and understanding of disability when we use an imperial rather than a national framework. To think about what happens when disabled people also occupied positions of relative power? And what happened when there is a slippage, which many today would find uneasy, between disability and colonialism? Tait, Kitto and Groom differ as individuals and in their experiences of empire and of deafness, but I believe that looking at them together helps us to think about the diversity of colonial experiences, as well as reclaiming the lives of deaf people who, when not marginalised altogether, are most often confined within the history of victimhood.

John Kitto (1804-1854)

The first of my case studies is John Kitto, a deaf man from a working-class family in Plymouth.[10] Born hearing, Kitto became deaf at the age of twelve when he fell thirty-five feet from a roof on to the paved courtyard below, sustaining considerable injury to his head. Regaining consciousness after a two week coma, Kitto found he had not only lost his hearing, but that his voice became painful and hard to use while his enunciation, which had previously been 'remarkably clear and distinct', became 'much altered' and difficult to understand.[11] His deafness thus manifested in the visible marker of having to use the manual alphabet to spell out what he wanted to say, though he distanced himself from the wider deaf community, claiming to have always 'abominated' sign language which he considered beneath him.[12] Social class as well as disability shaped Kitto's early experiences. He came from a family

deeply impoverished due to his father's alcoholism, and he spent his childhood and adolescence in and out of workhouses.

Kitto's first engagement with the British Empire came from his role as a missionary for the evangelical Church of England Missionary Society (CMS) under whose auspices he travelled to Malta in June 1827. At that time, Malta occupied the unusual position of being a British colony in the Mediterranean. The relationship between missionaries and imperialism is very complicated and varied greatly over time and place.[13] Some historians have suggested that the 'Bible followed the flag', shoring up a British presence in distant colonial spaces, while others have drawn attention to points at which the relationship between missionaries and the colonial state was actively antagonistic.[14] But, whatever the correlation with the formal British Empire, it is clear that missionaries were agents of cultural imperialism. It was not simply that missionaries encouraged the prosleytisation of indigenous people in and beyond the Empire, but that they engaged in a widespread process of cultural reform demanding that prospective converts adopt a wide range of western behaviours. These included embracing 'civilisation' through certain forms of dress, living quarters that focussed on providing personal privacy, and curtailment of polygamous marriages.[15] For this reason Jeffrey Cox, among others, have raised the question as to whether Protestant missionaries were in fact the 'worst imperialists of them all', more penetrative into indigenous cultures than 'official' colonial activity.[16]

While race and gender have now been widely recognised to structure the missionary world, so too were they ableist enterprises that privileged the non-disabled body.[17] One way in which this can be seen, is through their use of language and imagery. Missionaries consistently characterised non-Christian peoples ('heathens' in the contemporary language) through the imagery of disability claiming that Indians and Africans, amongst other colonial people were 'deaf to the word', 'blind to the light' and 'too lame to walk alone'.[18] A second way in which ableism structured the missionary enterprise can be seen was in their recruitment policies. Highly conscious of the costs of supporting incapacitated missionaries, and saturated with their own prejudices around mental, physical and spiritual 'health', missionary societies throughout this period systematically filtered out those deemed to have a physical or emotional impairment. In the London Missionary Society, candidates who had experienced, or had a family history of, epilepsy or mental illness were automatically rejected, as were those who had speech impediments, were deaf, or had a family history of deafness, conditions believed to impede a candidate's ability to learn a foreign language.[19] It was perhaps for these reasons that when it had been first suggested, Kitto, saw a missionary career as an impossibility: 'I thought

myself entirely incompetent to the duties of so arduous a station' and he considered his 'deafness' an 'obstacle'. However in this case, a solution was found whereby he worked for the Church Missionary Society (the CMS, a major, Anglican missionary organisation) as a printer.[20] Ableism can also be seen in the way in which Kitto was treated by the CMS when he was in Malta. Kitto had a series of disagreements with the other missionaries in Malta, not least because, due to his deafness, he found it difficult to join in their evening conversations and preferred to spend the time reading alone, something that was not considered acceptable in this particular missionary circle where part of being an 'good colleague' involved shared socialising. He left Malta on bad terms with his employers, complaining that they did not understand his 'privations' as a deaf man who found communication difficult.

As a printer, rather than as an evangelist, Kitto was one step removed from the people of Malta, but but nonetheless he was deeply implicated in the cultural imperialism of the missionary enterprise, printing the texts used for converting people to Protestantism and supporting the infrastructure of the CMS enterprise in Malta. Furthermore, his writing about Malta demonstrates that, along with his hearing colleagues, Kitto imbued the prejudices of wider missionary discourse and was shocked and disturbed by the Catholicism he encountered. 'The people of this island are very zealous', he wrote in a private letter to friends back home, 'but it is the zeal of error against truth, of darkness against light'.[21]

It is for his second colonial encounter, in the Middle East where he travelled as the tutor of the children of missionary Anthony Groves (1795-1853), for which Kitto was more widely known as his journal 'The Deaf Traveller,' was published upon his return in *The Penny Magazine*. Kitto visited Baghdad during a period of extreme political turbulence and his arrival in 1830 shortly preceded three major occurrences: the dispossession of the Mamluk rulers and re-imposition of direct Ottoman rule by Ali Ridha Pasha (1864-1943), a protracted siege, and an outbreak of plague. While, unlike Malta, Baghdad was not a site of formal British control in this period, there were ways in which a colonising European influence was starting to be felt including through the presence of an East India Company Resident in the city and the missionary work of Kitto's employer and others.[22]

In Baghdad, Kitto clearly identified himself in the position of the white coloniser unlike the 'natives' he encountered in the street and in the market place. Interestingly, as I have explored elsewhere, in this location Kitto's Europeanness also worked to counteract some of the manifestations of his deafness.[23] Neither his laboured articulation, nor his occasional resort

to gesture, of which Kitto was usually very self-conscious were, in Baghdad, identifiable performances of deafness. Whilst bemoaning his powers of articulation in Britain, which he claimed induced people to stop and stare at him, in Bagdad Kitto believed his occasional signing caused him 'to seem to them rather as a foreigner ignorant of their language, than as deaf; and the resort to signs had not strangeness to them or attracted that notice from others which it never fails to do in this country [Britain]'.[24] Even more identifiable performances of deafness, such as finger-spelling, could be represented in the colonial field, not as disability, but as one of the wondrous European 'achievements' brought to un-European spaces. Of finger-spelling or the manual alphabet, Kitto wrote:

> How greatly did not ... the natives of the country marvel at it, as one of the mysteries which might have been hidden under the seal of Solomon. And how pleasant was it to behold the reverence and admiration of THE USEFUL eradiate their swart countenances when the simple principle of the art was explained to them, and it was shown to be as available FOR THEIR OWN LANGUAGES – Arabian, Persian, Turkish – as for any other.[25]

Here finger-spelling is imbued with the same awe-inspiring powers that missionaries described the written word to have had in other contexts. Finger-spelling was not represented here as a signifier of disability, but as another example of the enlightened technology of the European.[26]

As Edward Said and other postcolonial writers have identified, one of the key ways in which Europeans constructed 'the West' as superior to 'the East' was through writing about the East in an 'orientalising' manner: constructing it as mystical, exotic, but ultimately 'different'. Kitto's reading of Baghdad as 'the great scene of Arabian Tale and romance' can be placed in this tradition.[27] So too can his later works, written when he had returned to England and which included: *The Pictorial Bible*, which was published in three large volumes between 1835 and 1838; *History of Palestine and the Holy Land, including a Complete History of the Jews* (two volumes, 1841); *History of Palestine from the Patriarchal Age to the Present Time* (1852); *Cyclopeadia of Biblical Literature* (two vols, 1848). Kitto's narratives are full of the details one might expect from any piece of travel writing from the Middle East: trials with packhorses, the 'strange' people, landscapes and customs he encounters, the intrigue with which the 'Arabs and the Turks' treated his lead pencil; and exciting illustrations of camels and turbaned men.[28] Kitto writes from an essentially European perspective, making many observations on behalf of his imagined European readers about the perceived bodily

'difference' of the Oriental 'natives', of how they could sit cross-legged for long periods without pain and bear high degrees of thirst.[29] As in the accounts of contemporary 'Orientalist' writers, Kitto's whiteness, masculinity, learning and familiarity through travel with the places about which he is writing, combine to create the authoritative voice typical of a colonial writer. Characteristic tropes include his 'ethnographic' descriptions of place and people, and the collapsing of space and time in depictions of the 'East' where the assumption is made that by looking at Palestine and Persia in the 1830s one would 'see' the 'Biblical Land' of two millennia earlier. [30]

Through writing about the 'Orient', Kitto made quite a name for himself as a travel writer and biblical scholar. As such, he was able to distance himself from his deaf identity which was carefully separated from his authorial identity. He was also able to some degree to escape his working-class roots, and whist often short of money, was able to adopt a much more middle-class persona and lifestyle until his relatively early death at the age of fifty, when he was travelling to Germany in search of a cure for the headaches that had plagued him since his initial accident.

George Tait (b. 1828)

George Tait had a quite different life trajectory to John Kitto, not least in terms of his relationship with the British Empire.[31] Tait was born in 1828 in Watten, a rural parish in the county of Caithness in the far north of Scotland. While rapidly becoming incorporated in the imperial metropole, the Highlands where Tait was born, were still perceived by the dominant English culture as 'wild', 'clannish', 'uncivilised', and 'different'. Emerging from a prolonged programme of clearance of people from the land, the Highlands had witnessed a process of radical 'internal colonisation' in favour of sheep that propelled hundreds of thousands of Scots into the empire as refugees, emigrants and settlers.[32] While rural and poor, Tait depicted his childhood in a way that seems idyllic compared to Kitto's experiences of poverty and deprivation, surrounded by loving parents, grandparents and younger siblings. Far from being a traumatic life event, it can be speculated - from the complete absence of further information - that Tait was born deaf; he certainly never mentions the cause of his condition. He writes of his deafness as a special gift: 'I had ... a sort of vague idea that I was the only deaf and dumb person in the world, and I sigh as I remember those days of blissful ignorance when I knew nothing of this hard, cruel world'.[33] His parents, however, worried about his deafness and when

they moved to the town of Wick were relieved to find out about deaf institutions. Tait was sent to a deaf institution in Edinburgh a considerable distance from his home.

Tait was educated at the Edinburgh Institution for the Deaf and Dumb, a large and prestigious organisation that itself had imperial connections.[34] Fellow students came from various places across the Empire including the Australian colonies, Cape Colony, Hudson's Bay, India, Ireland, Jamaica, the Orange Free State, and the USA.[35] Students learned about places of Empire through written exercises. And there was a considerable exchange of staff between Britain, USA and Canada.[36]

Like Kitto, Tait also had ambitions to travel. At the age of sixteen, he left school early with his mind 'full of what I had heard about countries far across the sea' and with the intention of seeing the world.[37] After a brief stay in London, Tait travelled to France, then back to Liverpool where he was determined to fill his dream and travel to America, a place he saw as 'a bright vision of silver and gold' where he could 'make [his] fortune'.[38] When he eventually arrived in America, Tait did not find his fortune, but worked on a shipyard on the East Coast. Learning of an uncle who had settled in Nova Scotia, Tait changed his plans and, following a brief correspondence, went to join him in Halifax; Tait eventually married and lived there for the remainder of his life.

Shortly after his arrival in Halifax, Tait was approached by the father of a twelve-year-old deaf girl who, until then, had received no education on account of her deafness, and he asked Tait to teach her. Education formed another link tying together metropole and colony, and it did so for the deaf as well as for the hearing. For example, settlers in New Zealand, Australia and Canada often sent their deaf children back to Britain for education where the institutions were more developed.[39] And teachers took with them new resources, information and pedagogical techniques. The girl's schooling soon attracted other deaf children from the vicinity and Tait began larger classes. Walking along the street one day, Tait noticed a man and woman conversing in sign-language. On approaching them, he discovered that the man, William Grey, had, like Tait himself, been educated at the Edinburgh Institution. They subsequently set up an institution in Halifax that grew in size, and they recruited additional teachers from Scotland. Tait's only publication, his *Autobiography of A Deaf Mute*, was firmly located within a disabled identity. Not only is the book prefixed and suffixed by engravings of the 'deaf and dumb alphabet', but it is published alongside a general account of deaf education tying together these issues. Another striking element of the text is that it is clear that Tait was

writing from a colonial space and addressing a Canadian audience rather than a British one. His opening passage reads: 'To begin my history where my life began, I shall invite my reader to travel in imagination far across the broad Atlantic, to the heathery hill of "Auld Scotland" where the kilted lads are born'. The primary place through which the adult Tait constitutes his identity, therefore, is Halifax. Tait had become a settler.

Assessing Tait's engagement with concepts of empire is perhaps harder than it is with Kitto. Although, unlike Kitto, Tait did not write about the active performance of a 'white' identity nor represent Canada in an Orientalist vein, he nonetheless crossed spaces of empire and engaged, albeit often indirectly, in acts of colonial settlement. Canada was a place that saw the massive dispossession of indigenous people. And colonial settlement was a violent form of colonial conquest. As Lorenzo Veracini argues, 'not all migrants are settlers', but settlers carry with them a distinct sovereign capacity – Tait became part of this ruling class, or ruling race.[40]

Jane Groom (1839-1918)[41]

Jane Groom was born of a higher social standing than either Tait or Kitto. The daughter of a land surveyor, and of a mother of some local influence, Groom was firmly middle class. However, after her education in the Deaf and Dumb School in Old Trafford, Manchester, she moved to London and became deeply involved with the impoverished deaf community in the capital's East End. In some ways, Groom might be identified, using the colonial imagery I discussed at the beginning of this chapter, as a deaf 'compatrador', someone Deaf theorist Paddy Ladd describes as one of a 'small group of Deaf people, mostly of middle-class parentage' who allowed benevolently-minded yet essentially disempowering hearing philanthropists to access the deaf in order to engage with a form of 'missionary colonialism'.[42] Certainly, Groom became tightly networked within a small group of hearing philanthropists and teachers concerned with deaf education and missionary work in East London, and particularly with the Reverend Samuel Smith (c.1832-1883) of the Association to Aid the Deaf and Dumb (AADD) and with Reverend William Stainer (1828-98), his assistant. She worked for a while with females at the British Asylum for Deaf and Dumb and later became a 'teacher of deaf and dumb children' under the London School Board.[43]

Horrified by the poverty and destitution she encountered in and around Bethnal Green, Groom looked for ways to improve the lives of people in London. After losing her job as a deaf teacher in the wake of the 1880 Milan Conference which, among other things, made it increasingly difficult for teachers who were themselves deaf to get employment teaching deaf

children, she travelled to Canada in 1881.[44] In Manitoba, she met two men she later claimed to have 'sent' there from the workhouse eighteen months previously. Both appeared to be doing 'exceedingly well' and much better than in London where unemployment was high and poverty was rife.[45] From examining the cases of these two men, Groom proposed that a more formal arrangement should be established whereby deaf people from the East End could be moved to Manitoba, a Canadian province which was in the throes of colonisation. 'I have noticed so much distress among the deaf and dumb', she wrote, 'that I feel perfectly sad at witnessing it, and I am sure that nothing can be done for them here [in London] to establish them satisfactorily. My opinion on this subject is that the only scheme to accomplish their ultimate well-being is to carry out my scheme of emigration to Canada.'[46] What had started as the ad-hoc relocation of a couple of deaf settlers and their families thus became something larger. It became, as Groom herself put it, 'An Emigration Scheme for the Deaf and Dumb'. She set up the Deaf and Dumb Emigration Society asking contributions to be passed on to Richenda Fry (1808-1884), a great nice of Elizabeth Fry (1780-1845), and herself deaf. In 1884, she travelled to Canada again, this time with ten deaf men, intending to settle a 'colony' for the deaf in the Canadian North West. Over the next ten years, Groom settled twenty-four more deaf settlers and their families in Canada much to the outrage of local white settlers who claimed that the 'deaf mutes' would be unable to support themselves and would soon be reliant on charity.[47]

This was a period when there was much propaganda encouraging people to move to Canada, and which promoted Canada as having an abundance of resources and space. The indigenous peoples who owned and lived on the land were deliberately excluded from these representations. The Dominion Lands Act, or the 'Homestead' Act, which was passed in Canada in 1872, had stipulated that individual white settlers might be 'given' 164 hectares of indigenous land in what became Manitoba and the North-West Territories, partly in a bid to stop the land being colonised by the USA. First Nations people were never compensated for this land. Under the terms of the Dominion Lands Act, Jane Groom proposed that 'each deaf and dumb person with family shall receive from fifty to one hundred and sixty acres for cultivation and, if deserving, one hundred and sixty more, as provided in the offer to emigrants by the Canadian Government.'[48] In Britain, talks, pamphlets and meetings were held to attract settlers. While the kinds of settlers that Canada wanted were essentially those who were white, able-bodied and British, various groups were able to use the legislation to their own ends and this period saw the settlement of Mennonite and Jewish communities in Manitoba as well as schemes for utopias, such as that envisaged by the Church Colonisation Society. Sir Charles

Tupper (1821-1915), who later became Canada's shortest serving Prime Minister, was High Commissioner of Canada in London from 1883 to 1895 and he was active in encouraging emigration to Canada.[49] Among other things, he engaged in considerable correspondence about Jane Groom and her scheme, forwarding a copy of her pamphlet, *A Future for the Deaf and Dumb in the Canadian North West,* to the Department of Agriculture in Canada.[50]

In order to engage with Groom's life and experiences, we must recognise that hers was a life profoundly shaped by imperial dynamics. Groom experienced many hardships on account of her deafness, her loss of employment following the Conference of Milan being a particularly stark example. But she was also able to benefit from her status as a white, middle-class woman in imperial Britain. Groom exuded confidence in her dealings with colonial officials when writing to the Department of Agriculture, the government department most associated with the Homesteader scheme, and she secured funding from, among others, William Gladstone via the secretive Royal Bounty Fund.[51] The Canadian Government held an ambivalent position in relation to the settlers. While several historians have usefully elucidated the way in which colonial governments were often very hostile to disabled settlers, and while the government in Canada was not prepared actively to support her scheme financially, she was also told that 'no objections would be made to the admission of such persons into the country if they were protected by her.'[52] Further, as well as avoiding restrictions being imposed upon deaf and dumb migrants entering Canada by guaranteeing their financial independence through the Homesteader scheme, some government agents wrote positively about the settlers. For example, John Smith, an immigration agent, defended the scheme, writing:

> When I visited Manitoba I gave this subject [deaf mutes] considerable attention. And as Miss Groom has sent a number of people out there and as you say this class of immigration is not to be deprecated when considered with due regard to these unfortunate yet industrious and intelligent people for, to their credit be it said, there are no more honest safer hard working immigrants come out to this country.[53]

Another way of thinking about the potentially colonial implications of her idea to create a 'deaf colony' is to place it alongside that formulated some thirty years earlier by John Jacobus Flournoy (1808-1879), the deaf son of a wealthy American slave-owner.[54] Flournoy, outraged at the discrimination that he faced as a deaf man, particularly by a law passed in Georgia reducing the status of deaf people to that of those with intellectual disabilities, he wanted 'to secure the government and offices of a small territory or State, to the mute community'.[55] The

scheme attracted much attention in the deaf community and was extensively debated in the deaf press for the rest of the century. Deaf people wrote both in support and in criticism of the deaf state, which some suggested might be called Deaf-Mutia or Gesturia.[56] Flournoy was also a virulent racist. His pamphlets, *A Reply to a Pamphlet Entitled, Bondage; A Moral Institution Sanctioned by the Scriptures and the Savior* and *An Essay on the origin, habits, and c. of the African race*, demonstrate a profound hatred of African Americans.[57] But the scheme, of course, if carried out, would also have displaced Native American people. While Groom never mentioned Flournoy's scheme, and certainly never expressed the vitriolic racism of Flournoy, comparing the schemes shows us how disability-based activism could coexist, not only within imperial frameworks, but could actively condone racist or colonialist agendas.

Analysis

Drawing any similarity between the lives of Kitto, Tait and Groom is difficult. They had profoundly diverse experiences including of deafness and imperialism. But this section seeks to think about what can be learned when we think about them together? What if anything can be learned from thinking of them as having led imperial lives? And how can this help us to understand the Victorians and disability?

What we know about all three of the people I have examined in this chapter is that they travelled to imperial places and as such had lives that were inflected by empire. As white, British people, they would have enjoyed a certain amount of privilege in these imperial spaces regardless of their disability. This is not to say that they necessarily endorsed imperialist values or that they did not also experience discrimination and marginalisation on account of their deafness. As I have said before in this chapter, the purpose of my argument is not to condemn Kitto, Tait and Groom as 'bad apples' or as 'deaf imperialists', but rather to use their lives to think about what it meant that the Victorians were at the heart of a global empire.

One thing we can conclude from looking at Kitto, Tait and Groom together is that empire was not simply something that effected upper or middle-class people, but was also experienced by people from working class, and in Kitto's case impoverished, backgrounds. In his 2004 study *The Absent-Minded Imperialists*, historian Bernard Porter argued that many working-class people were oblivious to the very existence of empire.[58] I disagree. Instead I would argue that the lives of British people were inflected by empire whether or not it was consciously registered

as such. And further, that recognising these inflections is key if the British are to overcome what has been described as their 'historical amnesia' towards empire which, amongst other things, has rendered many people oblivious to the destructive legacies of British imperialism in Britain and internationally today. But what we can draw from Porter's argument is that going to places of empire did not necessarily mean that a person reflected on this or engaged with an imperial ideology. None of the records of the three case studies that I have examined show any active engagement with the concept of empire, or commented on the fact that Canada and Malta were part of the British empire. Empire was simply something that existed from them, part of the backdrop of everyday life and the opportunities that were available to them.

We can also conclude that although there may be analogies drawn between being colonised and being disabled, these were not the same thing. And nor was the relationship between race and disability. Tait and Groom were able to use land in Canada precisely because they were not First Nations People, but white British settlers. Kitto meanwhile was able to use his white privilege to his advantage in the Bagdad market-place where his use of English, however impaired, gave him an elevated social status.

Another thing we can learn is that deafness was experienced and managed very differently by different people. Whilst Kitto 'abominated sign language' both Groom and Tait were to varying extents sign language users. Whilst Kitto distance himself from other deaf people both Groom and Tait sort them out and found their deafness to create bonds of connection in unexpected places. Whilst all three were literate to some degree, their facility with written English varied and this too would have shaped their lives. They also had differing degrees of connection with hearing people in the wider community with Groom cooperating with hearing philanthropists, whilst particularly in his early life, Kitto found conversation with hearing people painful and tedious.

Conclusion

In this chapter I have used three case studies, those of John Kitto, George Tait and Jane Groom, to think about the complicated relationship between disability, race and colonialism. I have argued that colonialism played a part in the lives of each of these individuals who, at least in some ways, were aligned with the coloniser. The early histories of disability in Britain have focussed on recovering the lives of deaf and disabled people who have experienced and resisted

various forms of disempowerment, particularly those of former residents of the schools and institutions that have proved so controversial. But reframing this work in a colonial context reminds us that such processes of disenfranchisement and exclusion were part of a wider shift in the constitution of a normative subject.

It also raises potentially uneasy questions about the ways in which people with disabilities, including deaf people, could occupy the position of an oppressor group as well as a group that has been repressed. Other examples might have been chosen to make this point more starkly. The partially deaf Francis Baring (1740-1810), for example, earned huge amounts of money from the transatlantic slave trade and for some years directed the East India Company as it sought to exploit the Indian subcontinent.[59] Francis Humberstone Mackenzie (1754-1815) was also deaf and was involved in slavery as well as being Governor of Barbados from 1800 to 1806.[60] But what I have intended to do here, is not to blame Kitto, Tait or Groom for being part of this global system, but to argue that to understand the lives of deaf and disabled Victorians we need to have an understanding of the wider colonial situation of which they were a part and not to assume that disabled people were always on the side of colonial resistance.

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