

Reviews

Jennifer Regan-Lefebvre, *Cosmopolitan Nationalism in the Victorian Empire: Ireland, India and the Politics of Alfred Webb* (Houndmills, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 272+pp. £49.40, \$59.96 (USD), €62.64, ISBN: 0230220851, ISBN-13: 978-0230220850

No household name by any account in the first place, Alfred Webb may be more familiar to historians with an interest in Irish Home Rule than to postcolonial and literary scholars like myself. I first came across Webb a few years ago while conducting research on late-Victorian Anglo-Indian women's romances, when I stumbled upon this rather unlikely Irish President of the Indian National Congress of 1894. In the wake of postcolonial endeavours to link the experiences of nineteenth-century Ireland with those of colonised India, however, Webb suddenly gains in importance. He was, after all, during the fiftieth anniversary celebrations of Indian independence, and in the same breath as Annie Besant and Sir William Wedderburn, mentioned as an important champion of the advancement of Indian nationalism.¹ A champion of India for many of his fifty years of public life and a friend of prominent Parsi politician and British MP Dadabhai Naoroji, Regan-Lefebvre's wonderful biography of the man sheds light on especially how this Quaker managed, in his political views, to reconcile Irish nationalism with a profound interest in foreign, colonial, and Indian affairs.

After Marie-Louise Legg's annotated edition of Webb's 1906 *Autobiography of a Quaker Nationalist* Regan-Lefebvre's informed study provides the objective historical counterweight to an aged politician's personal reminiscences. The wealth of archival material drawn upon is admirable; the meticulous reconstruction of events and undertakings inspired. What is more, however, is how Regan-Lefebvre brings this man to life. If Webb's Irish Quaker background made him a 'friend' to a variety of causes from abolitionism to temperance, women's suffrage, a repeal of the Contagious Diseases Act, and the creation of a *Compendium of Irish Biography*, Regan-Lefebvre's attitude is equally genial. Webb emerges as a hard-working man with elevated moral standards, which at points lead to frustration, depression and despair in his dealings with the Irish Parliamentary Party, Parliament or individuals like Charles Stewart Parnell, Isaac Butt or Timothy Michael Healy. Knocked back several times, Webb stood up time and again to pursue his political and social ideals, in more and less glamorous public roles: as a printer of pamphlets; as secretary and treasurer of the Evicted Tenants Fund, the Home Rule League, the National League, the Irish Party or the United Irish League; as an MP and eventually President of the 1894 Indian National Congress. And as

Regan-Lefebvre convincingly shows in her balanced portrait of Webb, there was a subculture within Irish nationalism at the time that was international, cosmopolitan, open-minded and liberal in its attitude towards and collaboration with the British Empire and colonised people like the Indians. Webb was convinced that the Irish – at the same time both at the centre and periphery of the British Empire – ‘had a responsibility to collaborate with and assist other “suffering people,” not simply to extract their assistance for immediate Irish political gains. [With individuals like Webb and Naoroji] [f]or a few years during the 1890s, their hopes of responsible Parliamentary imperial governance began to be realised’ (173).

Knowledgeable and endearing, with a wealth of memorable and at one or two points even hilarious pieces of information – such as the Webb family’s ownership of the dried, mummy-like head of United Irishman John Sheares, who was executed for his involvement in the 1798 rebellion (20), or Webb’s visit to the Ladies’ Land League office where he saw these ‘Joans of Arc’ combing each others’ hair (87) – Regan-Lefebvre’s biography of Webb is both informative and a good read.

Note

1. See M. V. Kamath. ‘The Men and Women who Fought for Freedom’. *The Leela* 2. (Aug–Sept. 1997): 3.

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Tom Mole (ed.), *Romanticism and Celebrity Culture 1750–1850* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 295+xi pp. £50.00, \$95.00 (USD), €64.45, ISBN: 0521884772, ISBN-13: 978-0521884778

Fifteen minutes of fame might be the allotted span for the contemporary celebrity; yet such easily-dismissed transience is only one of the factors working against any serious, historical understanding of the growth of celebrity culture. The essays in this illuminating volume demonstrate that numerous factors coalesced between 1750 and 1850 to form the recognisable dynamics of modern celebrity culture, prominent amongst them being the spread of print and visual media, urbanisation and the creation of large, popular audiences, and the spread of commodity culture. As Tom Mole neatly encapsulates it in his introduction, ‘Celebrity was no longer something you had; it was now something you were’ (2). In the Romantic period, celebrity