**Writing like a woman:**

**Rita Hinden and recovering the imperial in international thought**

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A couple of years ago I presented a paper exploring how female Ministers for Overseas Development – Barbara Castle, Judith Hart, and Claire Short – experienced and enacted their political role as a woman. Overseas development within the British government has often been dispensed by a woman (more so than any other ministerial role except women and equalities), and it is interesting to think why that might be, and how that might affect the reception of overseas aid. I examined the gendered reception of their identity (the press coverage framed around their role ‘mothering the world’ through the dispensation of aid, hate mail which responded as much to their personal appearance as their actual policies), and the ways in which critiques of aid policy often became critiques of these politicians as feminine figures (aid spending being cast as an overly sentimental drain on the public purse, supported by emotional female politicians). I also explored how these women used their femininity to sell aid to the British and international public, embracing photo opportunities and babies in the global south, or casting aid as a way to improve the lives of ‘women and girls’ around the world.

In the question session, one senior male academic put up his hand to dispute the idea that these women’s gender was especially influential in the politics of overseas aid. He argued that the women had developed political perspectives on aid and development through their position within the Labour movement and that this, and the chronological context in which they were working, was more important than their gender. This critique is perhaps reasonable; it is clearly important not to reduce female politicians to their gender, and the fact that these women were all Labour politicians might indeed have more to do with their perspective on aid or depiction as aid ministers. But one aspect of his question stuck with me: at one point, he commented that Judith Hart was an economist, and so ‘did not write like a woman’.[[1]](#footnote-1)

I found intriguing both the idea that it is possible as a female politician to write identifiably ‘like a woman’, and that this necessarily precludes writing like an economist. Does specialism and expertise neutralise women’s gender; does neutrality mean, in reality, writing ‘like a man’? How does this affect women’s ability to develop their ideas, and how those ideas are received? And how has this dual expectation, about how women should write, and which writing is taken seriously, shaped the canon on international thought? As Patricia Owens and Katharina Rietzler make clear, if we want to do the work of recovering women’s writing about international thought, we need to examine how work understood to be carried out by ‘women’ has been received, and understand how the ‘operations of gender, the discursive organization and interpretation of sexual difference’ have shaped the ‘conditions, content and reception’ of international thought.[[2]](#footnote-2) But, Owens, Rietzler, Kimberly Hutchings and Sarah C. Dunstan, the editors of the accompanying anthology argue, we also need to continuously interrogate the idea that there is a single way that women interject in this field, or that women’s writing has some essential womanly category that makes it stand out from that of men, or that women’s international thought is worthy of study only because it has some feminine essence that men’s international thought is lacking (or free from).[[3]](#footnote-3) We need to avoid ‘essentializing or romanticising women’ whilst simultaneously understanding that without including women (or in fact anyone who is not a cis man) in the IR canon, that canon will remain incomplete.[[4]](#footnote-4)

After this conference, I continued to think about this idea of writing ‘like a woman’ and how this could be understood within the context of the canon of writing on international thought. The field in which I work – imperial history – has often been a space in which women have been recovered as active protagonists, but still have rarely been credited as intellectual figures. For example, there has been important work to explore the development of ‘imperial feminism’ or ‘maternal imperialism’, in which historians already predisposed to take gender seriously have demonstrated that British women used the empire as a space in which to demonstrate agency and independence, often with the intention of improving white women’s position in the British metropole. Antoinette Burton’s pioneering work on Josephine Butler and the Contagious Diseases Act in India problematises the idea of imperial ‘sisterhood’ and draws attention to the racial disparities at work between these white women and their Indian ‘sisters’.[[5]](#footnote-5) (When Mary Church Terrell spoke about the women of colour sacrificing their husbands and sons for war, ‘together with their white sisters’, it can be read as reclaiming this idea of ‘sisterhood’ to make a claim for racial equality and her own womanhood).[[6]](#footnote-6)

Despite this work, imperial women (from the periphery and the metropole) are generally excluded from the canon of international thought. This is because of two gaps in the field: firstly, women’s writing, as illustrated by the *Women in International Thought* project, has been systemically erased from the canon of international thought and IR, and it has also often been omitted from the work that has been done on intellectual histories of imperialism; secondly, the imperial is often a missing dimension in IR and international thought, despite the fact that for many countries in both the global north and the global south, imperialism was the central organising structure for international relations for a significant portion of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.[[7]](#footnote-7) *Women’s International Thought: Towards a New Canon* goes some way to recovering questions of imperialism as part of IR thought: the writing of Jessie Fauset, Margery Perham, Sibyl Crowe and Amy Jacques Garvey takes empire and colonialism seriously as a site of international relations and as a space in which key questions of international thought are considered. Just as importantly, and also featured in the anthology, women such as Jane Nardal, Eslanda Robeson and Claudia Jones considered anticolonialism as a movement which had a canon of its own, which should be approached as an intellectual field as much as an activist moment. The decentring of anticolonial thought as part of the canon, in favour of writing about anticolonial *action* as a historic and political event viewed from the perspective of the metropole, was a key way in which IR and international history replicated the power structures of imperialism and diminished the vibrant and complex intellectual narratives and structures of anticolonial movements. Recovering these women’s voices, then, also helps us to move some way towards critiquing other inequalities within the canon itself.

In this context, I would like to argue for the inclusion in the canon of another colonial thinker who wrote ‘like a woman’: Rita Hinden, born Rebecca Gesundheit in Cape Town in 1909 to Jewish parents originally from Poland. Hinden’s life and work raise, for me, some important questions about the role of women in the canon, and how their experiences might help us to reshape what the canon is, or should be.

Rita’s family moved from South Africa to Palestine when she was a teenager, and she was educated in Tel Aviv and Cape Town before eventually convincing her father to allow her to travel to London to attend LSE; there she received a degree in economics and met her husband, Elchon Hinden, with whom she returned to Palestine in 1935. However, the Hindens were increasingly unsettled by the rise of an aggressive nationalism and dogmatism developing among Palestinian Zionists in response to the rise of Nazism in Europe; the couple became agnostics and decided to move back to London so that their two children could be raised in the United Kingdom. On her return to London, having worked as an economics researcher and freelance journalist, Rita hired a nanny to care for the children and returned to LSE to pursue a doctorate, which she completed in 1939, and which was entitled ‘Palestine: an experiment in colonialism’.[[8]](#footnote-8)

Rita and her husband were both left-wing, and Rita was a member of both the Fabians and her local Labour Party from 1939. Through these networks, she met Arthur Creech Jones, who would become in 1947 the Attlee government’s Secretary of State for the Colonies. Before this, the two of them worked together to establish in 1940 the Fabian Colonial Bureau (FCB), which for twenty years represented the most consistent British left-wing intellectual response to the British empire and decolonisation and, as the ‘sole political research group devoting its efforts to colonial affairs’ during the period, had considerable public authority.[[9]](#footnote-9)

Hinden’s work was wide ranging. She was the secretary of the FCB until 1950, edited the organisation’s journal *Empire* (later renamed *Venture*), and seems to have written a substantial proportion of its articles. She also published a number of texts on the topic of British imperialism, especially exploring the future of the British empire, for a wide range of audiences. These ranged from a full length book, *Plan for Africa* (1943) ‘which defined most of the principles of Fabian colonial policy developed and expounded during the war years’, to an Army Bureau of Current Affairs pamphlet, *Colonial Problem* (1945), which provided for serving British soldiers a historical background on the empire and suggested discussion questions that officers could use to tease out ideas about imperialism (many of which were framed around the idea that the British public should embrace decolonisation in the near future). She was also a frequent writer of Fabian tracts and research papers, and an editor of Fabian collected essays.

Hinden’s views on imperialism were complex. Often maternalistic in her approach to imperial populations, she was not hesitant at times to espouse the general Fabian line that colonies needed to be stewarded to independence in a gradualist approach that downplayed the existing agency of independence movements. For example, in one 1959 essay, she reflected on the Attlee government’s approach as one that had accepted Britain’s rule over the colonies ‘with the determination to nurse and develop it for the advantage of its rightful owners till they themselves should have come of age’.[[10]](#footnote-12) However, she could also be more radical, writing in 1943 that ‘the possession of Colonies conflicts with the ideals of democracy – unless your interpretation of democracy confines it to men or women of the white races only’.[[11]](#footnote-13) Her writing and thinking was guided by the belief that Britain had a moral duty to use development policies – which were increasingly being adopted by colonial metropoles in the 1940s and 1950s as a way to make the colonies more profitable whilst, at least temporarily, dampening colonial resistance movements – to improve the lives of colonial peoples and to ready nations for independence.[[12]](#footnote-14) For a time, these views were influential on the British government, not least because of Creech Jones’ role in the Cabinet and their close friendship; the Attlee government initially pursued an identifiably ‘Fabian’ approach to the African colonies in particular.[[13]](#footnote-15) In 1950, she became disillusioned with British colonial policy as the economic crisis meant that expensive developmentalist projects were being side-lined, and left the FCB to edit *Socialist Commentary*, for which she frequently wrote and commissioned pieces exploring colonial politics and policies.

Hinden’s role in the FCB and position editing *Socialist Commentary* raises questions about how women could create roles for themselves in institutions through personal networks of connection and solidarity, and how these might become spaces that enabled female thinkers to develop in ways that might otherwise have been difficult at the time. The role of Secretary at the Fabian Colonial Bureau was held by women for a number of consecutive appointments; these women were not mere clerical assistants but were treated as intellectual authorities and were allowed to develop significant specialisms in the field, which they pursued into their later careers. When Hinden resigned, she was replaced by Marjorie Nicholson, who had trained as a teacher and worked at East Ham Girls School as well as tutoring for the Workers Educational Association (WEA) and running the Oxfordshire extra-mural history programme. She had become assistant secretary of the FCB at the end of the war, but continued her interest in education, in 1949 taking three months leave to work as an adult education teacher in Nigeria, before returning to England to take over the position of Secretary. She was an influential figure, advocating strongly for the British government to work closely with independence movements in African countries to work towards decolonisation. In 1955 she resigned as Secretary, but continued to write and research for the FCB, and also took up a position with the Commonwealth Bureau at the TUC, becoming one of the only women to work in trade union policymaking in the 1950s. When she died in the 1970s, she was half-way through writing a two-book volume on the international connections of the TUC.

Hilda Selwyn Clarke, who worked as secretary of the FCB after Marjorie, had been an activist for the ILP, and worked for Fenner Brockway. She met her husband, Dr Selwyn Selwyn-Clarke, through this activity, and followed him to colonial postings in Ghana and Nigeria. From February 1938 they lived in Hong Kong where he was director of medical services – she chaired the local Eugenics League (which provided birth control for working class women) and worked at the local hospital; during the war she, her daughter and her husband were taken prisoner by the Japanese and held – in horrible conditions – for a year. When they returned to London via the Seychelles in 1951, Hilda was elected to the London County Council and then replaced Marjorie Nicholson as Secretary at the Fabian Colonial Bureau, where, again, her direct knowledge and expertise in colonial medicine allowed her to make an intellectual as well as organisational contribution to the organisation, publishing and commissioning talks and writing on this topic.

She was replaced by Margaret Roberts, who was a prominent South African anti-apartheid activist and respected economist, with degrees from both Rhodes University and Newnham, and a prior career in lecturing in economics at Newnham. On her marriage to Colin Legum, (the Observer’s South Africa correspondent) she moved to London, took up the position as secretary of the FCB and also became editor of *Venture*. Throughout her career she wrote and edited a series of important books arguing for economic sanctions on South Africa and in 2002, having returned to the country, wrote an influential economic text, *It Doesn't Have to Be Like This: a New Economy for South Africa and the World.* Hinden’s role as the first Secretary of the FCB seems to have established a trend, in other words, for women to fulfil this role in a way which enabled them to develop as respected writers and curators of international thought; it is instructive to explore institutions as spaces in which women might potentially find their ideas and intellectual development respected and nurtured. Women’s networks, as well as women as individual writers, should be considered within the context of the canon of international thought, not least as part of a feminist project to emphasise how ideas, rather than being the product of single (male) genius brains, are far more frequently co-produced, and might be nurtured and supported by institutions and networks, or dismissed and buried. The Women’s International League of Peace and Freedom (WILPF), for example, which is represented in the anthology through the work of Jane Addams, Emily Greene Balch, Helene Stöcker, Helena Swanwick and Mary Church Terrell, could productively be explored as a site itself of the development of a canon of intellectual writing about war, peace and international relations.

Hinden’s life and work also demonstrates the intersections between gender, race, ethnicity and class, as well as political affiliation and identity, that shaped the development of the imperial and foreign policy canon in this period. Hinden was a mother to two young children when she began her research and writing career, which was enabled initially by a nanny. She was also a disabled woman, as a condition called osteosclerosis had left her deaf since her time in Palestine in the 1930s, and she was reliant on a hearing aid until an operation in her later life restored her hearing. Disabled women with young children are certainly not over-represented within the canon of international thought. Disability (which globally is disproportionately likely to affect women compared to men, and likely to have more of an effect on their financial wellbeing and career prospects; it is also a deeply racialised identity) could be another important topic for future analysis in building the canon of female and other excluded writers.

Hinden’s ethnic and racial identity, as a white South African Jewish woman, working in the period from the end of empire to decolonisation, was also complex in terms of where her voice was situated, where she was granted authority and for whom she was allowed to speak. In some ways, her history demonstrates that in the mid-century British left, both education and whiteness could allow women to claim expertise in specific topics and be taken seriously as authorities in both practical knowledge and more theoretical conceptual work; this might often come at the exclusion of people of colour or people without the at this point rare privilege of tertiary education. But Hinden was also a woman from a minoritized ethnic group of colonial heritage, who used her position often to foreground voices from the global south; her time at the FCB saw the offices become a space that leaders from independence movements would frequent whenever they were in London, and her tenure as editor of *Venture* saw a number of writers of colour published as authorities on a variety of topics. She also organised conferences on colonial policy that platformed speakers of colonial heritage, on one occasion hosting Kwame Nkrumah and W. Arthur Lewis to speak on ‘Reasons for Distrust on the Part of Colonial Peoples’, at a panel which she predicted in a letter to Lewis would be ‘a certain amount of fun’.[[14]](#footnote-16) Nevertheless, it is important to read her work against, as Owens and Rietzler have highlighted, the ‘systematic marginalization of Black scholars from the Anglo-American academic discipline of IR’; if we add Hinden to the canon, who else should be brought in alongside her?[[15]](#footnote-17)

Hinden’s relative prominence and authority at the time she was writing, and her comparative obscurity in history books and international relations texts produced since, highlight the ways in which the IR canon is constructed to leave spaces and silences and the systemic erasure of women more generally from the political and international history of mid-century Britain. Her history also demonstrates the specificity of what is considered ‘international thought’ and what is not. Writing about decolonisation and the end of empire often seems to be less represented in the IR canon than other topics, even when the end of imperialism contained within it many key questions about statebuilding, foreign policy and the national interest.[[16]](#footnote-19) And Hinden’s approach to international thought – which was fundamentally predicated on questions of morality and was concerned as much with what ordinary people wanted as it was with the realpolitik of foreign relations – does not always sit naturally with the rest of the canon from this period.

The work of Owens, Rietzler, Hutchings and Dunstan is critical, not only in – vitally – reinvigorating the canon through recovering these female voices, but also through calling attention to the hegemony of the canon in determining how we write, talk and think about IR. As a historian, it is the language of the archive over that of canon that I find myself drawn to in my work. But as these editors remind us, canons ‘establish and legitimize new academic disciplines or intellectual fields [by] outlining their central questions and providing for their pedagogical reproduction’.[[17]](#footnote-20) Historians are not above the canon, in other words; in fact, we replicate it both in the historiography in which we ground our work and the sources on which we draw for our research. This project is not merely ‘the add-on of a few new names’, but a way of calling attention to our understanding and our construction of who is allowed to write about what, and which writing counts. The women anthologised here may or may not write ‘like a woman’, and their writing should not be included in the canon as a way of merely diluting its existing masculinity. Rather, perhaps, their writing can lead us to ask more probing questions about how the canon functions, and how we might break out of its constraints.

1. In actual fact, Hart was trained as a sociologist and briefly worked as a sociology lecturer, although she later wrote a great deal of important material on the economics of aid, such as Judith Hart, *Aid and Liberation: A Socialist Study of Aid Politics* (London, Gollancz: 1973). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Patricia Owens and Katharina Rietzler, ‘Introduction: towards a history of women’s international thought’, in Owens and Rietzler (eds), *Women’s International Thought: A New History* (Cambridge , 2021), pp. 9-10. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Patricia Owens, Katharina Rietzler, Kimberly Hutchings and Sarah C. Dunstan, eds, *Women’s International Thought: Towards a New Canon* (Cambridge, 2021). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Patricia Owens and Katharina Rietzler, ‘Introduction: towards a history of women’s international thought’, in Owens and Rietzler (eds), *Women’s International Thought: A New History* (Cambridge , 2021), p. 9. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Antoinette Burton, ‘The white woman's burden: British feminists and the Indian woman, 1865–1915’, Women's Studies International Forum, Volume 13, Issue 4 (1990), pp. 295-308 [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Mary Church Terrell, ‘From “Speech and Resolution Presented at International Women’s Confernece, Zurich” (1919), in Patricia Owens, Katharina Rietzler, Kimberly Hutchings and Sarah C. Dunstan, eds, *Women’s International Thought: Towards a New Canon* (Cambridge, 2021), p. 393. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. One notable recent exception is Lyndsey Stonebridge’s book *Placeless People: Writing, Rights, and Refugees* (2018), which has running through it a clear exploration of the intellectual history of imperialism and how this relates to ideas of refugees, citizenship and statelessness, and explicitly places female thinkers such as Hannah Arendt, Simone Weil and Dorothy Thompson alongside their male counterparts. This work is continued in this anthology, not least through the inclusion of Weil’s writing on French colonialism. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Having read some of the research that comprised this PhD, I am not sure if it is written more like a woman or like an economist; Patricia Pugh, ‘Hinden [née Gesundheit], Rita (1909–1971), journalist and campaigner on colonial issues’. Oxford Dictionary of National Biography. Retrieved 6 Aug. 2021, from https://www.oxforddnb.com/view/10.1093/ref:odnb/9780198614128.001.0001/odnb-9780198614128-e-59962. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Josephine Fishel Milburn, ‘The Fabian Society and the British Labour Party’, *The Western Political Quarterly*, Vol. 11, No. 2 (Jun., 1958), pp. 336-7; Kenneth O. Morgan, ‘Imperialism at Bay: British Labour and Decolonization’, *JICH*, vol. 27, no. 2 (1999), p. 236. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Rita Hinden, ‘Socialism and the Colonial World’, in Arthur Creech Jones (ed.) New Fabian Colonial Essays, (London: Hogarth Press, 1959), p. 9. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
11. Rita Hinden, *The Colonies and Us* (Fabian Society, Socialist Propaganda Committee, Pamphlet 4) (1943) [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
12. See Charlotte Lydia Riley, ‘‘The Winds of Change Are Blowing Economically’: the Labour Party and British Overseas Development, 1940s–1960s’’, in *Britain, France and the Decolonization of Africa: Future Imperfect?,* edited by Andrew W.M. Smith and Chris Jeppesen (UCL Press: London, 2017), pp. 43–61 [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
13. See Charlotte Lydia Riley, (2013) ‘Monstrous predatory vampires and beneficent fairy-godmothers: British post-war colonial development in Africa’. Doctoral thesis , UCL (University College London). [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
14. Yoichi Milne, ‘The Political Element in the Works of W. Arthur Lewis: the 1954 Lewis Model and African Development’, *The Developing Economics,* XLIV-3 (Sept 2006), p. 341 [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
15. Patricia Owens and Katharina Rietzler, ‘Introduction: towards a history of women’s international thought’, in Owens and Rietzler (eds), *Women’s International Thought: A New History* (Cambridge , 2021), p. 4. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
16. See Owens and Rietzler, ‘Introduction: towards a history of women’s international thought’, p. 6. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
17. ‘Introduction’, Patricia Owens, Katharina Rietzler, Kimberly Hutchings and Sarah C. Dunstan, eds, *Women’s International Thought: Towards a New Canon* (Cambridge, 2021), p. 393. p. 5. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)