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Abstract
The Anglo-Boer War is conventionally seen as part of the history of southern Africa or of British imperialism. This essay offers an Indian perspective on the conflict, in particular as it was experienced and seen through the eyes of a young Indian lawyer. M.K. Gandhi, later renowned as a religious visionary, social critic, advocate of non-violence, and a powerful opponent of British imperialism in India, in the early months of the conflict organized and helped to lead an Indian ambulance corps in the service of the government. This was one of his earliest interventions in imperial politics, for which he was honoured with an imperial medal. Such an apparently surprising episode merits attention - for it sheds light on the position of Indians in southern Africa as well as on the development of Gandhi’s own thinking on a number of critical issues.

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The Anglo-Boer War is conventionally seen as part of the history of southern Africa or of British imperialism. This essay offers an Indian perspective on the conflict, in particular as it was experienced and seen through the eyes of a young Indian lawyer. M.K. Gandhi, later renowned as a religious visionary, social critic, advocate of non-violence, and a powerful opponent of British imperialism in India, in the early months of the conflict organized and helped to lead an Indian ambulance corps in the service of the government. This was one of his earliest interventions in imperial politics, for which he was honoured with an imperial medal. Such an apparently surprising episode merits attention - for it sheds light on the position of Indians in southern Africa as well as on the development of Gandhi's own thinking on a number of critical issues.

Indian communities had become established in southern Africa by the later nineteenth century. Their numbers were few in the Cape and in the Orange Free State, compared with the Transvaal, where in 1899 about 17,000 lived, and Natal, where in 1894 there were over double that number and Indians were overtaking numerically the white Natal population. Indians came to this part of the continent, as to other parts of the British Empire, either as indentured labourers, brought in to provide labour where the local population was deemed 'unfit', particularly for hard work on plantations or in mines, or as free 'passenger' Indians, who paid their own way and inserted themselves into the local economies as petty traders. Towards the end of the century the free Indians were joined by the majority of ex-indentured labourers who became free when their indentures expired and they chose not to return to India, and by the free-born children of indentured labourers. Such diaspora Indians were British citizens, subjects of the Queen-Empress, Victoria, who had proclaimed to her Indian subjects after the 1857 Mutiny that they would not be discriminated against on grounds of religion or race. However, in practice their experience overseas within the Empire was one of profound discrimination, and, as in Natal, of growing hostility from a white population which felt itself to be culturally embattled, and threatened by Indian numbers and their growing economic strength. White settlers sought to defend themselves with varieties of control over Indian rights to
vote, to reside, and to trade.

Into this situation came Gandhi in 1893, a London-trained barrister aged 24, hoping for better fortune in South Africa than in India, on a year’s contract with a Gujarati trading firm who needed an English-speaking lawyer to assist them with a legal case. Ultimately, Gandhi’s experience in South Africa was to be radically transformative, enabling him to return home in 1915 with a vision of a new India, and the technique of satyagraha, or non-violent resistance to wrong, which he was to put to the service of Indian nationalism. An imminent threat to Indian voting rights in Natal encouraged his Indian friends to ask him to stay on at the expiry of his contract and help them fight discrimination. He brought his family over from India and began to establish himself as a successful lawyer, with a comfortable westernized life-style. As he later remarked, ‘part of the expense [of the household] was solely for the sake of prestige. I thought it necessary to have a household in keeping with my position as an Indian barrister in Natal and as a representative’. He looked back mockingly on his insistence that his wife and children should wear western-style shoes and stockings, and eat with knives and forks, because of his ‘infatuation with these signs of civilization’.

Despite the appearance of bourgeois respectability and acceptance of western standards of ‘civilization’, there were soon signs that the young man was embarking on the long pilgrimage which was to become his hallmark. He simplified his lifestyle, even buying a book on washing and insisting on washing his own collars, despite the ridicule of his fellow barristers. At a deeper level he engaged in a religious search for meaning beyond the confines of his own Hindu tradition. As a student in London and now in Africa he met people of many different religious persuasions, and began to read widely about a number of religions. Gradually he came to a belief in a ‘Truth’ which was beyond the doctrinal formulations of any one religious tradition, which could only be approached through service of one’s fellows, particularly the poorest. He had come to Africa for mundane and worldly reasons: unexpectedly he found himself in search of God, and came to see ‘that God could be realized only through service’. As Gandhi was drawn into public affairs he gained a high profile within the Indian community, and beyond it, as a champion of Indian rights. His reputation was such in some sections of the white community in Natal, that when he returned with his family from India at the end of 1896 there were attempts to prevent the boat on which he was travelling from docking at Durban. When he landed he was threatened by a crowd and rescued by the prompt intervention of the Police Superintendent and his wife; he eventually escaped by disguising himself as an Indian police constable. Gandhi’s political goals at this time were to claim for Indians their rights as British subjects and to fight against discrimination on grounds of colour. His methods were studiously legal and moderate, including public meetings, petitions, pamphlets, and the founding of a
new Indian political organization, the Natal Indian Congress. He was overtly loyal to the British monarch and to the British constitution, and his complaint was that local discrimination against Indians was contrary to British traditions and could be rectified by appealing to British justice and 'fair play'. Like many of his compatriots in India he also believed at this juncture that British rule over India was providential and would work for India's good.

The outbreak of the Anglo-Boer War and the threat to British interests challenged Gandhi and demanded from him a public response. He recognized that it was a significant milestone in his public career, and devoted a chapter to it in his *Autobiography*, and in his book, *Satyagraha in South Africa*, which he completed in 1924. This was significant as both these publications were not straightforward historical accounts of his life and work, but were intended to be teaching mechanisms in the context of India's own struggle for political freedom, and the first experiments with non-violent resistance in the name of the Indian nation. Gandhi's personal sympathies lay with the Boers. But in the confusion Indians experienced, with Indian refugees escaping in considerable numbers from Boer areas, and the possibility of living under Boer rule in the event of British defeat, Gandhi gave a clear lead that they should live up to their claims to be equal British subjects, despite their colour. The war was in effect 'a golden opportunity'. He later reported his argument at the time:

> Our existence in South Africa is only in our capacity as British subjects. In every memorial we have presented, we have asserted our rights as such. We have been proud of our British citizenship, or have given our rulers and the world to believe we are so proud. Our rulers profess to safeguard our rights because we are British subjects, and what little rights we still retain, we retain because we are British subjects. It would be unbecoming to our dignity as a nation to look on with folded hands at a time when ruin stared the British in the face as well as ourselves, simply because they ill-treat us here.

On 17 October about 100 well-educated, English-speaking Indians met in Durban to consider their position. Subsequently, through Gandhi, over twenty-five who were considered physically fit offered their services freely to the Colonial Secretary in Pietermaritzburg, freely in the context of the war, though they admitted they did not know how to handle arms.

The motive underlying this humble offer is to endeavour to prove that, in common with other subjects of the Queen-Empress in South Africa, the Indians, too, are ready to do duty for their Sovereign on the battle field. The offer is meant to be an earnest of Indian loyalty.

Although the volunteers were mainly educated professionals, their letter also promised monetary support from the Indian mercantile community. They were almost certainly all accustomed to working together in the Natal Indian Congress. Gandhi was also instrumental in encouraging
Indian women in Durban, from families of Indian merchants and traders, to contribute to the war effort through the Durban Women’s Patriotic League Fund, to which he himself contributed three guineas.

The offer of service was not immediately accepted. Meantime Gandhi, and some of those who had joined him in the offer, received rudimentary medical training from one of their European allies, a Dr Booth, an Anglican priest and doctor, who was instrumental in persuading the colonial authorities that his pupils could act as leaders to a corps of bearers recruited from among the Indian indentured labourers, once it had become apparent that Indian help was badly needed. So came into being the Indian Ambulance Corps, with Dr Booth as its Medical Superintendent. Eventually, in mid-December 1899, over 1000 Indians left for the front, while Indian traders supported them with supplies and gifts over and above their military rations. It was typical of Gandhi that he kept meticulous accounts of money disbursed in the enterprise, and even returned eleven unused railway tickets authorized by the District Engineer for use by the Corps.¹³ The Corps worked at the front for some weeks, the demands on it being harder than even Gandhi had expected.¹⁴ They carried the wounded on stretchers for miles, to field hospital or railway station, over roads barely worth the name, in hilly, dry conditions, often themselves having little food, water, shelter, or sleep. Moreover, though their conditions of service gave them immunity from work within the firing line, they agreed to carry stretchers within range of Boer fire at Spion Kop. Although indentured labourers would have been used to hard physical work, the more educated of higher social standing would have been quite unused to it, and in normal conditions would have considered such work beneath their dignity, compounded by the potentially polluting contact with the injured, dead, and dying. Gandhi was deeply proud of his compatriots; and with considerable magnanimity – considering the indignities to which he himself had been subjected by some of the white settlers – he commented that none of the Europeans with whom Indians came into contact in the war situation treated them with contempt or discourtesy.

This brief episode is of considerable importance in relation to Gandhi’s role after his return to his homeland, and also for an understanding of the nature of imperialism as experienced by the colonial subjects of the British Empire. Most obviously, it demonstrates the young lawyer’s growing public skills, particularly those of argument and organization within the Indian community, and the opportunities open in the imperial context for an educated Indian to carve out a role for himself as a representative of the Indian community in relation to the colonial authorities. It also shows how the young man whose diffidence and nervous disposition had in the past inhibited his career and contacts, now had no hesitation in negotiating with colonial officials (and also an Anglican Bishop), and engaging in
productive relationships across racial barriers, as in the case of Dr Booth. More deeply, the raising of the Corps, and the arguments Gandhi used for its justification, suggest that, even at this early stage in his personal development and public life, he was grappling with a range of issues which were to become critical in his mature thought and action. These issues were also central to the ideology and practice of imperialism, and often in contention between the British and their Indian subjects.

Gandhi’s argument to his compatriots for assisting the colonial authorities during the war raised the issue of citizenship. Clearly in part this was a matter of sensible strategy: Indians claimed rights as British citizens - now they had the chance to demonstrate publicly by their actions that they were as loyal as white citizens. Moreover, one of the criticisms laid against them in the particular conditions of South Africa was that they were there entirely for monetary self-interest. Gandhi later wrote:

One of the charges laid against the Indians was, that they went to South Africa only for money-grubbing and were merely a dead-weight upon the British. Like worms which settle inside wood and eat it up hollow, the Indians were in South Africa only to fatten themselves upon them. [They] would not render them the slightest aid if the country was invaded or if their homes were raided. The British in such a case would have not only to defend themselves against the enemy but at the same time to protect the Indians.¹⁵

Here was an occasion to show that Indians were fully participating citizens, not parasites upon the Empire.

However, beneath the element of strategy in this argument, the seizing of the war-time ‘golden opportunity’, Gandhi was engaging with ideas of citizenship, and particularly of actively participant citizenship and the relationship between the individual and the state. He stated that, although he felt that justice was on the Boer side, individual subjects of a state should not hope to enforce their private opinions in all cases.

The authorities may not always be right, but so long as the subjects own allegiance to a state, it is their clear duty generally to accommodate themselves, and to accord their support, to acts of the state.¹⁶

When he wrote this in 1924, he said he would use just the same arguments as he had done in 1899, if he still retained faith in British government and the state as constituted in India by it. He had, indeed, put this principle into practice in India on his return, when he assisted in recruitment in his home region during the First World War, saying that Indians must help in the War if they wished to enjoy the benefits of the state under whose protection they lived.¹⁷ It was only from 1920 that he abandoned his belief in the justice of British rule in India, and judged that it was his duty to oppose it as a ‘satanic’ institution.

Gandhi’s argument in 1899 was an early exposition of his later, mature
understanding of the relationship of the individual and the state.\textsuperscript{18} He believed that this relationship was an organic one – that the state was not some external imposition, but the sum of the individuals in it. Citizens sustained the state by their actions and attitudes, even if they were often unconscious of this process, and therefore they were morally bound to and responsible for it. From this it followed that citizens were not only bound to obey and support the state in times of crisis, as in 1899, but should also be properly critical, as moral individuals, of its actions. Only thus would it be confined within appropriate bounds and kept on the path of morality.

Such an understanding of the relationship between the individual and the state, led Gandhi to a theory of moral opposition to the state and eventually to a position of outright hostility to British rule in India. As early as 1889 he was convinced that the state might sometimes be in the wrong, as it was manifestly to him in South Africa. Nonetheless, citizens had a clear duty to support the state unless they felt that the actions of the state created for them a grave and general ‘moral crisis’. In such a situation they had a moral duty to oppose the state’s action:

> if any class among the subjects considers that the action of a government is immoral from a religious standpoint, before they help or hinder it, they must endeavour fully and even at the risk of their lives to dissuade the government from pursuing such a course. We have done nothing of the kind. Such a moral crisis is not present before us, and no one says that we wish to hold aloof from this [Anglo-Boer] war for any such universal and comprehensive reason.\textsuperscript{19}

For Gandhi this comprehensive moral crisis only became apparent in India in 1920. Until then, he believed that citizens confronted with specific aspects of wrong at the hands of the colonial state and its officials (whether in South Africa or India) should oppose such wrong by reasoned argument and eventually by non-violent resistance. He called the latter ‘soul-force’ or ‘truth-force’, and used the word \textit{satyagraha} to distinguish it from passive resistance. Within a decade of the Boer War it had become part of his repertoire of political action in South Africa, and was expounded in his first and only major political treatise, written in 1909, \textit{Hind Swaraj}.\textsuperscript{20} In this he elaborated his view of the moral interrelationship between a state and its citizens, and argued that Indians had in effect handed over their country to the British because of their moral and cultural weakness. Consequently mere political home rule would not solve their predicament, for they would be left with an Indian-run state with the same defects. Only radical change in the lives of individual Indians would ultimately create a new sort of state.

In India Gandhi was eventually to put his theory of the relationship between the citizen and the state, and his vision of the moral, participant citizen, into practice, pressing both to their ultimate limits. After four
years of opposition to specific instances of wrong but not to the state as such, he engaged from 1920 in outright opposition to British rule, once he felt it was totally immoral and incapable of sustaining a moral relationship with its citizens. But – true to the vision of *Hind Swaraj* – he combined this with work both at individual level and in society at large to transform Indians into those he envisaged as new moral individuals and hence a new type of citizen, capable of new relationships with a genuinely Indian state. In so doing, he was engaging with British imperialism at its ideological core. For one of its essential justifications in India was that Indians were for historical, cultural and temperamental reasons incapable of citizenship, and therefore unfit to rule themselves.

Underlying Gandhi's struggles with the notion of citizenship was an even deeper moral issue – that of duty. Like citizenship, it was also a moral ideal integral to British imperialism. One of the moral and psychological underpinnings of British rule over Asians and Africans was a sense of duty – that the British were *bound* to exercise such rule because of their superior civilization, their religion, and their practice in the arts of sound law and good government. Duty was a powerful motif in late Victorian thinking, nourished by Evangelical Christianity, but also vital for the increasing numbers for whom specifically religious belief was becoming increasingly problematic. Linked to it was a concern for character, which would enable the individual to curb their lower nature, engage in altruistic behaviour, and play a full part in public affairs.

Gandhi shared many of these concerns with his English contemporaries, not surprisingly, given his western-style education and his period as a legal student in London before he went to South Africa. However, his understanding of duty was also deeply rooted in Hindu thinking. The word *dharma*, duty, is in India's Sanskrit languages the word used for 'religion', and highlights the primacy of duty in one's particular place in society and life. Moreover, anguish over the nature of duty is central to the great Hindu poem, the *Bhagavad Gita*, which was one of Gandhi's favourite religious texts. However, Gandhi was not bound by tradition: rather he used and reworked it, often using inspiration from other sources which fertilized and renewed old concepts. While in South Africa he cast off the idea that duty for him was rigorous observation of social conventions rooted in Hindu tradition. Indeed, in his personal life-style and that of his family and widening circle of close adherents, he deliberately broke with many such conventions, for example, by condemning the practice of untouchability and doing degrading work conventionally thought of as polluting. For him, duty increasingly meant following the inner call of what he called Truth, particularly in service of others. It was this inner conviction which led him to a highly varied public role in South Africa, where his activities stretched from legal work and journalism, to more obvious 'political' work and organization, to nursing and campaigning for cleanliness in Indian homes.
The full flowering of this vision of Truth, and of the genuinely human life as the search for Truth, was evident some years after the Boer War, particularly when in 1906 he took a vow of celibacy (in his mind, to free himself for wider public work and strengthen him by subduing his lower nature), and in 1909 when he wrote *Hind Swaraj* with its exposition of truth-force or *satyagraha*. But Gandhi's involvement in the Ambulance Corps, and his arguments for Indian participation, show him struggling with the nature of duty in that particular context, and evolving the notion of the religious man as an activist and public servant, taking morality from the temple and the privacy of the individual life, out on to the streets and into civic contexts. Such an expansion of the notion of duty, both for himself and increasingly in his speaking and writing about the new India he hoped would come into being, became one of the hallmarks of his work in India. It would in turn help to give many of his compatriots a new sense of their own significance and agency in the making of a nation. It was also a powerful argument in his moral challenge to the British Raj, denying the British the monopoly of public duty, and challenging the Raj in the name of mature, high-minded, active Indian citizens, whose presumed non-existence the British had made a moral foundation of their imperial rule.

Closely linked to the notion of duty in Gandhi's thinking was the concept of masculinity. This again was a crucial concern to his generation of educated Victorians, steeped in the Anglo-Saxon culture of Britain diffused through the English-speaking world. It, in turn, was closely linked to the issue of 'character' and the ideal of the altruistic public man. A distinctive construction of masculinity was both nurtured and demonstrated in such varied contexts as the British public-school system, the Scouting Movement, 'muscular Christianity', and the concern for sport and physical courage, and the healthy male body. Proper masculinity was seen to include physical resilience and self-disregard, leading to public service. It was also an ideal which fed into and sustained the imperial rulers' self-image away from home in the business of ruling an empire, and often also powerfully influenced the image they constructed of their colonial subjects. In India, the ideal of masculinity was thought to be embodied in the men of the Indian Civil Service – most of whom, of course, had been through the public-school system. It was also present in the British assumption that many of their Hindu subjects were 'effeminate' and therefore unfit for self-rule. Bengalis, particularly those who had received a western education, were the particular target of this image-making. As the Private Secretary to the Viceroy remarked to his diary on 10 September 1906, in one of the more picturesque articulations of this attitude, 'The Bengalis are a low-lying people in a low-lying land with the intellect of a Greek and the grit of a rabbit.' It was perhaps not surprising that those subjects (particularly those who had received western education) in turn were deeply concerned with their own masculinity, and
often sought to 'prove' it in ways which reflected their rulers' own constructions of gender, for example in movements to develop physical courage and prowess.29

Gandhi shared these concerns about Indian masculinity in general, and his own in particular. They were a significant element in his response to the Boer War. Reporting his arguments at the time for the offer of free Indian service to the government, he retorted to those who feared that, in the event of a Boer victory, such support for the British would bring down on Indians a 'fearful revenge':

To waste the slightest thought upon such a contingency would only be a sign of our effeminacy and a reflection on our loyalty. Would an Englishman think for a moment what would happen to himself if the English lost the war? A man about to join a war cannot advance such an argument without forfeiting his manhood.30

The concern for 'manliness' as understood by the British was present, too, in his concern to prove that Indians were not money-grubbing parasites within the Empire, incapable of self-defence and needing the protection of the more manly white settlers.31 At this juncture, he evidently still subscribed to the cultural assumptions of the imperial race, that 'manliness' was displayed in physical courage and stoicism in the face of physical hardship. His accounts of Indians' work as stretcher-bearers, stressed their physical courage and stamina in harsh conditions and within the firing line. Yet, as we know, the decision to offer service in an Ambulance Corps was taken out of necessity, because none of them knew how to bear arms, rather than from conscientious aversion to combat. Gandhi was reported as saying publicly that had Indians skilled in combat such as Gurkhas and Sikhs, been present in the Indian community 'they would have shown what they could do in the way of fighting'.32

Gandhi's understanding of true manliness was at a critical juncture in this decade. Within a few years he had re-worked his understanding of it, just as he had modified the British notion of 'duty'. By 1909, when he wrote Hind Swaraj, he clearly held the belief which was to be his for the rest of his life, that the capacity for non-violent resistance to wrong was the hallmark of the truly courageous and 'manly'. Firstly, it required moral courage and true manliness to oppose wrong, particularly unjust laws: 'It is contrary to our manhood, if we obey laws repugnant to our conscience.'33 But, secondly, to oppose wrong non-violently, it required physical courage and fortitude of a far greater order than the man who responded with violence. When the questioner in Hind Swaraj assumed that passive resistance was 'a splendid weapon of the weak'. Gandhi responded:

This is gross ignorance. Passive resistance, that is, soul-force, is matchless. It is superior to the force of arms ... Physical-force men are strangers to the
courage that is requisite in a passive resister ... a passive resister will say he will not obey a law that is against his conscience, even though he may be blown to pieces at the mouth of a cannon.

What do you think? Wherein is courage required – in blowing others to pieces from behind a cannon or with a smiling face to approach a cannon and to be blown to pieces? Who is the true warrior – he who keeps death always as a bosom-friend or he who controls the death of others? Believe me that a man devoid of courage and manhood can never be a passive resister.34

So Gandhi used imperial understandings of ‘manliness’ and inverted them through his exposition of the significance of non-violence, suggesting that the non-violent subject who obeyed the voice of conscience and demonstrated spiritual strength was displaying manliness and courage of a deeper quality than those, including the imperial rulers, who merely wielded the weapons of force. In a further twist, which drew on the Hindu understanding of the power of sexual restraint to conserve spiritual power, Gandhi himself became a celibate, as noted above, and argued in Hind Swaraj that only the perfectly chaste could become passive resisters in the service of their country. ‘Chastity is one of the greatest disciplines without which the mind cannot attain requisite firmness. A man who is unchaste loses stamina, becomes emasculated and cowardly.’35 Gandhi had thus taken the ideal of ‘manliness’ so central to imperial ideology, and reconstructed it to challenge the British at the heart of their self-image as rulers.

This examination of an episode in the Boer War from an Indian perspective, has demonstrated how that event was experienced by some of the Indians resident in South Africa. In particular it demonstrates how one young Indian lawyer saw it as a critical opportunity in the experience of Indians as British citizens within a world-wide empire, and how it could be put to good use to strengthen their claims for rights as British citizens. The war also gave him a chance to reinforce his position of leadership within the Indian community in South Africa, by taking a leading role in the discussions about desirable Indian responses to the war. In the subsequent work of the Indian Ambulance Corps, he was able to raise his profile and legitimacy with the authorities as a ‘representative’ of his compatriots. More deeply, the moral and political crisis of the war demanded that the young Gandhi should address issues of identity and of fundamental values which were at the heart of the relationship between rulers and ruled in the context of British imperialism. At this juncture, very early in his public career, we see him wrestling with dilemmas of citizenship, duty and manliness, the resolutions of which were to become key elements in his later stance as a radical opponent of the British Raj in India, and integral to his vision of a new Indian society and polity.
NOTES


8. *Ibid.*, pp. 142-3. He stated, 'hardly ever have I known anybody to cherish such loyalty as I did to the British Constitution ... I believed that British rule was on the whole beneficial to the ruled'.


12. Gandhi to the Colonial Secretary, 19 October 1899, *The Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi*, vol. 3 (Delhi: Govt. of India, 1960), pp. 113-4. [Henceforth *CWMG*]

13. Gandhi to the District Engineer, 13 December 1899, *CWMG*, vol. 3, p. 130. (It is indicative of the social hierarchy within the Indian community that 1st-, 2nd- and 3rd-class tickets were authorized: the bearers from the indentured group travelled 3rd-class.)

14. For accounts of its work by Gandhi, see the special article contributed by Gandhi to the weekly edition of *The Times of India*, 16 June 1900, *CWMG*, vol. 3, pp. 137-141; Gandhi, *Satyagraha in South Africa*, pp. 77-78.


17. For this episode, see Judith M. Brown, *Gandhi's Rise To Power: Indian Politics 1915-1922* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1972), pp. 147-8. (This episode in 1918 has remarkable similarities to Gandhi's intervention in the Boer War.)


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21. This was clear in his practical work for village upliftment and in his two ashram communities; the best single exposition of his 'Constructive Programme' in December 1941 can be found in Gandhi, Hind Swaraj, ed. Parel, pp. 170-81.


27. A recent exploration of this is Mrinalini Sinha, Colonial Masculinity: The 'manly Englishman' and the 'effeminate Bengali' in the Late Nineteenth Century (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1995).


31. Ibid., p. 71.


34. Ibid., p. 93.

35. Ibid., p. 97.