

Contemplating Women's Imperial Service: Mabel Bent as Photographer, Travel Writer, and Collector

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Despite a growing body of literature on women's roles within the British Empire as settlers, teachers, nurses, missionaries, activists, and 'adventuresses,' their contribution to Victorian knowledge production remains underexamined. In particular, the labor of married women has often been subsumed under their husband's work and, as a result, has largely gone unrecognized. Treating them as emblematic of a shadow archive of married women's cultural production in the late 19th century, I interrogate Mabel Bent's diaries, photographs, and ethnographic collecting strategies showing that she exercised epistemic power through the imperial practices of representation and appropriation. I locate her productive and reproductive work within a complex web of service relationships between herself, the British Empire, and her husband, and show that while Bent related ambiguously to her service, she exploited it to defy gender conventions without risking her reputation.

Keywords: empire, knowledge production, women travelers, travel writing, photography

Married Women's Imperial Service: A Complex Web of Relationships

On July 4, 1929, *The Times* wrote in its obituary for Mabel Virginia Anna Bent that she “was of the greatest assistance to her husband in all his travels and discoveries. She was an experienced photographer, as well as an accurate observer ...” This characterization as secondary female helpmate in the male exploration and appropriation of the world for one of the most prolific British women travelers of the turn of the century seems emblematic for the perception of women's supposedly marginal and inconsequential position in the imperial project.

Mabel Virginia Anna Bent (1846–1929), together with her husband, amateur archaeologist and anthropologist Theodore Bent, traveled throughout the African continent and the Middle East at the close of the 19th century on behalf of Cecil Rhodes, the Royal Geographical Society, and the British Museum, among others. During these travels, she engaged in informal diplomacy, maintained colonial networks, oversaw excavations, joined in the collection of ethnographic objects, served as travel and excavation photographer, and produced 15 years' worth of travel writing. In this article I mean to treat Bent's travel writing as emblematic of a shadow archive of married women's work that has yet to be brought into the discourse of gender and empire.

I understand Mabel Bent's colonial engagement as a form of *service*, meaning “the application of competence for the benefit of another” (Maglio and Spohrer 18). Outside of economics, from which I borrow this definition, the notion of *service* has not been thoroughly theorized, and economic theorization allows little insight into the cultural workings of *service*. This oversight is curious as *service* is entangled in a net of notions that for a long time have circumscribed women's work. Hinging on relationships, *service* highlights philanthropy and caring for others, a sense of responsibility, moral conviction, and self-sacrifice; it also describes both paid and unpaid work. Though not exclusive of productive labor, *service* encompasses partially overlapping concepts that have variously been discussed as immaterial labor, reproductive labor, and care work, often connoted as female forms of labor such as taking care of others, managing households or tending to relationships. *Service's* semantic proximity to servitude also conjures up questions of hierarchy and submission which are closely associated with female virtues. Women have exploited this ambiguity to push into public life under the unthreatening veil of *service*. Mabel Bent, I argue, is one of these women. Thinking with the definition of Maglio and Spohrer, I interrogate her

service as to the competencies she applied while asking who benefited from them and in what ways. Including Bent's own relation to her service in the analysis will challenge the somewhat problematic rhetoric of cheerful self-sacrifice that is bound up with the term.

The competencies Mabel Bent applied broadly fall into two categories and translate into distinctive forms of work. First, they relate to something that I tentatively call domesticity on the move. It is constituted by care work, which has also been theorized in terms of reproductive labor (see England, and Duffy), like managing funds, ensuring food supply, caring for sick members of the traveling party, and building a network that offered material and immaterial support. These tasks allowed not only her but also her husband to engage in productive labor, the second form of work she performed. Through photography, writing, collecting, and hosting exhibitions, Bent produced one major commodity: knowledge.

Both her productive as well as her reproductive work, I argue, first and foremost served the British colonial project, either directly or indirectly.¹ Exercising epistemic power, Bent's broad range of cultural production supplied the British Empire with ostensible knowledge about the colonial Other in Southern Africa that ultimately legitimized British colonial rule. However, Bent's work not only served the empire but also, and more immediately, served her husband. Her work as socialite, financial manager, and quartermaster certainly served Theodore's interests. It made possible their expedition, ensured their survival, and freed him from much organizational work so that he could pour his efforts into excavating and writing. Her own travel writing supplemented Theodore's fieldnotes and can be traced in his publications, making them effectively collaborators. Her photography, for which she was only partially credited, lent credibility to his lectures and publications. Yet her service was not void of self-interest, as it provided her with opportunities to develop a career in photography and to push the boundaries of socially-sanctioned female behavior.

1. At this point, it should be noted that Mabel Bent was half-Irish on her mother's side and spent her childhood in Ireland, where her English father had bought up property from impoverished Irish landowners in addition to his landholdings in Essex (Brisch xiv-xv), a background that complicates her position within the British Empire. She publicly opposed Irish home rule and made known her membership in the Primrose League, whose motto was "Imperium et Libertas," clearly stating her affiliation with the United Kingdom and the British Empire ("Gentlewomen at Home"). While it might be interesting to explore how her Irish heritage impacted her self-conception and public reception, it has little bearing on the way her service was of profit to the British Empire.

In order to analyze Mabel Bent's work in this complex network of service-relations, I draw on her diaries and letters from the couple's Zimbabwe expedition, supplementing them with news reporting and Theodore's monograph, *The Ruined Cities of Mashonaland*, and with catalogue records from the British Museum. These sources allow a multi-perspective insight into the Bents' Zimbabwe expedition and Mabel Bent's public positions. Her diaries are a well-kept record of the proceedings of the travel party, noting geographical details, expenses, provisions, challenges faced, contacts made, and later on covers the progress of the excavation and contact with Indigenous groups. Often, entries are recorded for several days in a row, making up for days Bent was too busy to immediately take notes. A typical entry from the trek reads:

April 6th. On again at 5 till 9. We rode only $\frac{3}{4}$ of an hour and outspanned at 9. It is very windy. Mr. S's wagon stuck. This is all green enough with woods and grass in this part of the Kalahara desert. We could find no water today and what we have is very nasty. In some parts travellers have to pay highly for what the Vaalpans suck up through reeds and spit into bottles!! (60-61)²

This signature mixture of matter-of-fact note-keeping peppered with shock-value details speaks to the dual nature of Bent's "Chronicles," as she calls them. As semi-private writing, Theodore relied on them in the preparation of his publications, while Mabel's immediate family read them for entertainment.

Bent's diaries have been retrieved from the archive of the Joint Library of the Hellenic and Roman Societies, London by independent scholar Gerald Brisch. He transcribed, lavishly annotated, and published them with additional material starting in 2006, in addition to regularly updating the invaluable online Bent Archive with historical documents connected to the couple's work.³ Since 2021, the University of London also hosts an open-access facsimile version of the complete manuscripts of Mabel Bent's diaries. Despite her work now being easily available for more than 15 years, it has not yet been the object of cultural or historical analysis.

2. If not otherwise indicated, I quote Mabel Bent from Gerald Brisch's edition of her travel writing collected and annotated in *The Travel Chronicles of Mrs. J. Theodore Bent. Volume II: The African Journeys*.

3. I am deeply indebted to Gerald Brisch and his pioneering work, through which he made publicly available not only Mabel Bent's Chronicles and letters but also an incredible amount of primary material that references her.

Up until the 1990s, imperial history deemed women largely inconsequential to colonial conquest. With a growing body of scholarship on women's contributions to the British Empire as settlers, teachers, nurses, missionaries, activists, and "adventuresses" (Midgley, Riedi, Bush), this misconception has since been addressed. However, women's positions within Victorian colonial systems of knowledge production remain underexamined despite extensive scholarship on the intersection of empire and knowledge. As Postcolonial Studies following Gramscian and Foucauldian conceptions of power has argued, colonial conquest was based not only on military or economic power but significantly, too, on epistemic power (Wagoner 783). The collection, (co-)production, structuring, and presenting of knowledges about the colonized enabled colonization at the periphery and justified it at the metropole. Women like Mabel Bent actively participated in these knowledge circuits.

Much of early feminist scholarship on women and empire argues that as both suffered from the same system of white patriarchal oppression, white women could empathize with colonial subjects and produced more benevolent representations than men. Earlier research also offered profeminist readings of women's travel texts that, in an effort to reinscribe women's agency into the historiography, neglected the colonial power white women themselves held and exercised over colonial subjects. This recuperative form of gendered history has been widely criticized, prominently so by Jane Haggis in "White Women and Colonialism." Scholarship has since shifted to a more nuanced analysis of women's involvement in the colonial project. Thus, arguing from a poststructural position, Sara Mills identifies differences between male and female travel writing that she assigns not to essentialist female qualities but to discursive pressures that, in a 19th-century context, applied differently to men than to women. What is striking, though, is that the women featuring most prominently in the literature happen to be single or widowed, feeding into the stereotype of the "Spinster Abroad" that has dominated accounts of female mobility.⁴ This is not to say that married women did not participate in the public sphere; in fact, Sarah Richardson shows that they often sup-

4. See for example Julie English Early's "Unescorted in Africa: Victorian Women Ethnographers Toiling in the Fields of Sensational Science," or Dea Birkett's *Spinsters Abroad: Victorian Lady Explorers*. A notable exception is Billie Melman's *Women Orients: English Women and the Middle East, 1718-1918*, which deliberately engages married women's texts.

plemented their own networks with those of their husbands to pursue their own goals (2). Yet married women's work, as seen in the obituary for Mabel Bent quoted above, has often been subsumed under their husband's work and consequently has largely gone unrecognized.

Digging to Construct a White Heritage: The Significance of Great Zimbabwe to British Colonization

The Zimbabwe expedition proves an especially interesting case study among the Bents' numerous travels, because it is so clearly implicated in imperial interests. In 1891, when the Bents undertook their successful Zimbabwe expedition, the colonial situation in Southern Africa was undergoing rapid change. Cecil Rhodes, business magnate and Prime Minister of the Cape Colony, had just gained a Royal Charter from the British Crown. It granted the establishment of the British South Africa Company and endowed it with the governmental rights to make treaties and laws, preserve peace, maintain a police force, and acquire concessions from local chiefs in the name of the Queen in Matabeleland and Mashonaland.

In the wake of British formal power being rapidly consolidated, Rhodes became invested in justifying colonial rule and attracting white settlers and investors to the area. Both were directed at enlisting enduring support for the founding of a crown colony. The ruins of Great Zimbabwe presented an opportunity to reframe Zimbabwean history in a Christian tradition—their complex structure and age suggested, to Rhodes and other European minds, that they could only have been built by a highly-developed non-African people. This idea had first been advanced by German explorer Karl Mauch in 1871. Semitic people and Phoenicians were named among the possible builders, and fantasies of having found the Biblical port of Ophir, suggestive of gold, were running high. The ruins are native, and Rhodes' highly racist theories were already at the time disputed (Mwandayi 38–40). Regardless, as Innocent Pikirayi has argued, the ruins' value to justifying the establishment of a crown colony necessitated an archaeologist who was (racially) inclined to overlook contradictory evidence to investigate the site and propagate its non-nativeness and universal—meaning European—cultural value (297).

Rhodes settled on Theodore Bent, who had made a name for himself as a self-taught archaeologist arduously publishing his research that up to this point had mainly focused on the Mediterranean (Brisch 18–19). The expedition was organized according to the division of labor with Theodore Bent as archaeologist and ethnographer and Mabel Bent as photographer and quartermaster. Robert Swan joined the party as a cartographer tasked to provide the British Empire with detailed maps of territory hitherto unmapped by British forces. An unspecified number of predominantly Black men were employed for domestic and physical labor. The party arrived in Africa via Cape Town in January 1891, and after traveling northwards via various British Forts and paying visits to Indigenous leaders on the way, arrived at Great Zimbabwe after six months. Here they excavated for two months before they successfully returned to England. As the party traveled by ox-wagons through regions that had barely been opened up to large-scale cross-country travel with ever increasing volumes of luggage, the Black servants' labor but also their knowledge of the terrain and their skills in animal handling were integral to the expedition's success.

Financially, the expedition was supported not only by Cecil Rhodes, but also by the Royal Geographical Society and the British Association for the Advancement of Science (Brisch 40), indicating the importance allocated to imperially sanctioned knowledge about potential colonies and colonial subjects. Thus, the Bents' expedition can be read as an attempt to establish a Western cultural claim on Zimbabwe. Its prime goal consisted not in the acquisition of land, but in the production of knowledge that would construct colonial subjects as empire's Other and naturalize imperial rule.

Producing Empire's Other: Photography, Writing, and Ethnographic Collecting

Mabel Bent was one of the first British women working as an expedition photographer. As such, her work consisted of documenting the ruins, excavation findings, and ethnographic objects collected by the couple. She was also commissioned to take portraits of allied local authorities for the British South Africa Company. Photographing by day and developing negatives by night provided structure to Bent's life at the fringes of the British Empire. With few exceptions, her photographs have not survived in the archive;⁵ however, she discusses her photographic practice in her travel writing. At the time, Bent's photographs reached the British public in at least two ways. First, they illustrated not only Theodore Bent's lectures,

but also his monograph *The Ruined Cities of Mashonaland*, lending credibility to his archeological and ethnographic accounts. Second the British press used them in their coverage of the Bents' journey. However, they did not print the original photographs but rather etchings created "from a photograph by Mrs Theodore Bent" ("The Round Tower").

Bent's diary suggests that she conceived of her photography as work and of herself as a professional: references to photographic equipment, tripods, and an entire dark room tent contribute to the textual image of a professional photographer, which is furthered by accounts of her perseverance in adverse circumstances indicating her work ethic. After having fallen into a river en route to take photographs for the British South Africa Company, she posits: "I was wet through but so I remained because I was anxious not to give up my work" (53).

As only few photographs from the Zimbabwe expedition have survived, it is difficult to reconstruct the details of Mabel Bent's photographic practice. For the most part, in her journal she merely makes throwaway comments that she had "done a lot of photos" (55) or "had [her] camera with [her]" (96), without specifying what exactly she photographed or going into technical intricacies. From her remark that a servant packed away "objects yet unphotographed" (103), we know that she must have taken hundreds of photographs of the excavation finds, although she barely mentions doing so. They do not seem to be special to her but rather a necessity of the nature of her profession. When she does identify her photographic subjects, it is usually Indigenous people who interest her, along with what she considered to be exotic plants and animals, speaking to an appetite for the Other and an awareness of her audience. To put her imperial service as photographer into the terms of Maglio and Spohrer's notion of *service*, Mabel Bent applied her competencies in photography for the benefit of the British Empire, for which she helped create the myth of Great Zimbabwe and a colonial Other in need of British white supremacist civilization.

5. Her diaries record dismal weather conditions posing problems to processing her negatives: "[...] I encountered a difficulty not expected in Africa. I could not dry the negatives. There was only a fire in the open air and a whirling smoke and wind and dust so the poor things had to live for 3 or 4 days in a rack wrapped in a napkin and have suffered from prolonged damp and dust" (96). Coupled with the bias of the archive, this offers some explanation as to why so few of the photographs she recorded in her diaries seem to have survived.

Her photography promoted empire through two contradictory functions of photography: it exerted control over its subject at the same time as it imbued it with importance. The former, Allan Sekula identifies as the “repressive function” of photography and traces it to William Henry Fox Talbot’s early recognition of photography as a medium of proof of ownership. He recognizes the way photography is accepted as a new kind of “indexical truth,” a status not equally given to other visual media like painting or to textual inventories (6). The mechanisms of symbolic and literal appropriation are at work when Bent creates the photographic documentation of the excavation sites and of the archeological and ethnographic objects that she and her husband collected before having them shipped to England. It documents the Empire taking control of Indigenous cultural artefacts and heritage. In its repressive function, photography expresses power over and lays claim to its subject. Such symbolic appropriation extends to portrait photography. It is exemplified in the practice of photographically documenting prisoners, which was established in Britain by the 1860s (Sekula 5) as much as by anthropological and colonial photography.

The portraits Bent was commissioned to take of allied Indigenous authorities encoded British domination over Southern Africa. Yet they cannot be understood entirely as instruments of control, as they also recognized and, to some extent, paid tribute to the authority of local leaders. Sekula accounts for such acknowledgements by locating them within the honorific function of photography, tracing it to portrait painting and its tradition of “providing for the ceremonial presentation of the bourgeois *self*” (6). The portrait-taking of local authorities had the potential to strengthen alliances, which were indispensable for the British South Africa Company to consolidate power in Matabeleland and Mashonaland. Thus, photography functions as a double system of representation, and its representations can be actualized as honorific or repressive, or both. It is this contradictory moment of photography that makes it a powerful tool for colonial rule while also engendering troubled and unstable accounts of photographing colonial subjects in Mabel Bent’s diary.

Performing photography as her profession and not as a past-time or an art form meant that Bent had limited choice in her photographic subjects. One particularly telling instance of reluctance to perform her work is the following:

I took 2 [photographs] of [Chief Montshiwa's] 4 wives and 2 daughters. They also took an immense time getting in to English clothes. One sent for new stockings and their maids were assisting them all in public. Even stays were squeezed on by a lady whose figure was anything but European and we saw the friend tugging at the strings. These clothes were torn off at once. One wife put an ostrich feather uncurled in her turban and each carried a shawl to show she had a spare one. I did not care for this picture but I had to do it. I did a lot of little ones, but what I hope will turn out well is a Zulu witchdoctor in his war paint. (53)

In this excerpt, Bent provides a service to the British South Africa Company and takes the portraits of Rolang Chief Montshiwa and his family, allies to the British during and after the Bechuanaland Wars in the 1880s. Strategically, her service pays tribute to the Empire's allies and, through the honorific function of photography, recognizes their authority. At the same time, the photograph encodes partial British control of local and Indigenous elites that is linked both to the presence of European clothes as well as to the repressive function of photography. What unfolds can be read as an instance of mimicry which the text recounts in an unsettled uneasiness rooted in the contradictory representational functions of photography and the broader logics of empire.

The scene hinges on the colonially symbolic dichotomy of dress/undress that becomes unstabilized. In an essay on "Nakedness and the Colonial Imagination," Philippa Levine explores the constructed difference between two forms of undress: nakedness and nudity. Drawing on the contrast between Victorian "fine art" and colonial photography, she argues that nudity and nakedness are assigned different values, with the former being reserved for undress in line with Western Christian tradition (Greek statues, Victorian paintings), while the latter was engaged to capture the colonial subject's undress (190). Nakedness, then, encoded Otherness, as it was used to signify "a state of nature, unschooled, unselfconscious, lacking in shame and propriety" (191). It was a code readily available to Victorian audiences. Throughout Bent's diaries, the dichotomy of nakedness and clothes is a recurring theme that structures her racial discourse and serves to produce distinction. With passages like "they were all sitting by their fires cooking with the smallest possible amount of clothes. We were rather cold and very glad of our fire" (61), she routinely produces distinction between colonizers and colonized.

However, such distinction suddenly becomes impossible in the face of Mable Bent's Black photographic subjects' mimicry. The codes signifying superiority and civilization, such as stockings and stays, become hollow when they no longer serve to easily distinguish between self and Other, as "Other" is now, to use Homi Bhabha's description of mimicry, "almost the same, but not quite" (126).

The text then takes great care to re-inscribe the calming difference between Mabel Bent and the Black women by declaring their bodies incompatible with English clothes and by pointing to the ostensible failures in the garments' usage. Her text distances Bent from the scene by denying her complicity.

Taken hardly a year after the violent conquest of Matabeleland and Mashonaland through the so-called Pioneer Column, the photograph implies friendly, coercion-free relations between civilizer and civilized. It may have aided in managing the public image of the British empire by emphasizing its power, success, and benevolence.

However, the above description of the photographic process betrays a deeply-felt uneasiness about the picture's implicit content and by extension about the aim of the civilizing mission itself. Colonial rule, as the political theorist Partha Chatterjee has argued, was built on the rule of difference, meaning that the premise of its power was the superiority of the colonizer (10). Accordingly, the civilizing mission in its Christian tradition was marked by a grave contradiction: It inherently depended upon the belief that Africans were intrinsically equal and could, with enough guidance and practice, be helped along the ladder of progress (Steinmetz 345). Yet, if it were to be successful, this progress would threaten not only the premise of colonial rule but also white identity constructions anchored in Anglo-American superiority. Mabel Bent's text exposes this insecurity in its adverse reactions to what should have been, according to the paradigm of civilizatory progress, a desirable photographic subject. In response to this colonial conundrum, the text turns its attention to a photographic subject that allowed Mabel Bent maximum distance and differentiation in terms of dress, gender, race, and religion: the male, non-Christian "witchdoctor" who wears war paint instead of European clothes.

It is exactly this creation of hierarchical difference that constitutes Mabel Bent's imperial service. Shown as slides during Theodore's lectures for the learned societies of the day, her photographs turned into ostensibly objective knowledge about the Shona and Ndebele people and colonial Zimbabwe. They also became a point of departure for imperial imagination as illustrated by the example of the aforementioned etchings, which were used to illustrate reports of the Bents' expedition in the British press and which were based on actual photographs by Mabel Bent. If in Victorian science photography was ascribed an empirical function (Tucker 3), etchings declared to be based on them laid claim to the same kind of objectivity and credibility. However, some of these images were not true to the photographic original. On closer examination, one of the etchings, called

“The Round Tower in the Ruins of the Great Circular Temple,” appears to be based on the same photograph as the one published in Theodore Bent’s *Ruined Cities of Mashonaland* (Figure 1). There is one difference: the image published in the British illustrated weekly newspaper *The Graphic* (Figure 2) features a group of faceless Black people. Spears, shields, nudity, and loin cloths mark them as “native.” Mabel Bent’s work as photographer thus supplied the metropolitan center not only with ostensibly authentic photographs but also with templates to be filled in with stereotypical images sparked by colonial imagination. Masquerading as fact by virtue of the photographic original, these fictional depictions of Indigenous people consolidated the myth of savagery.

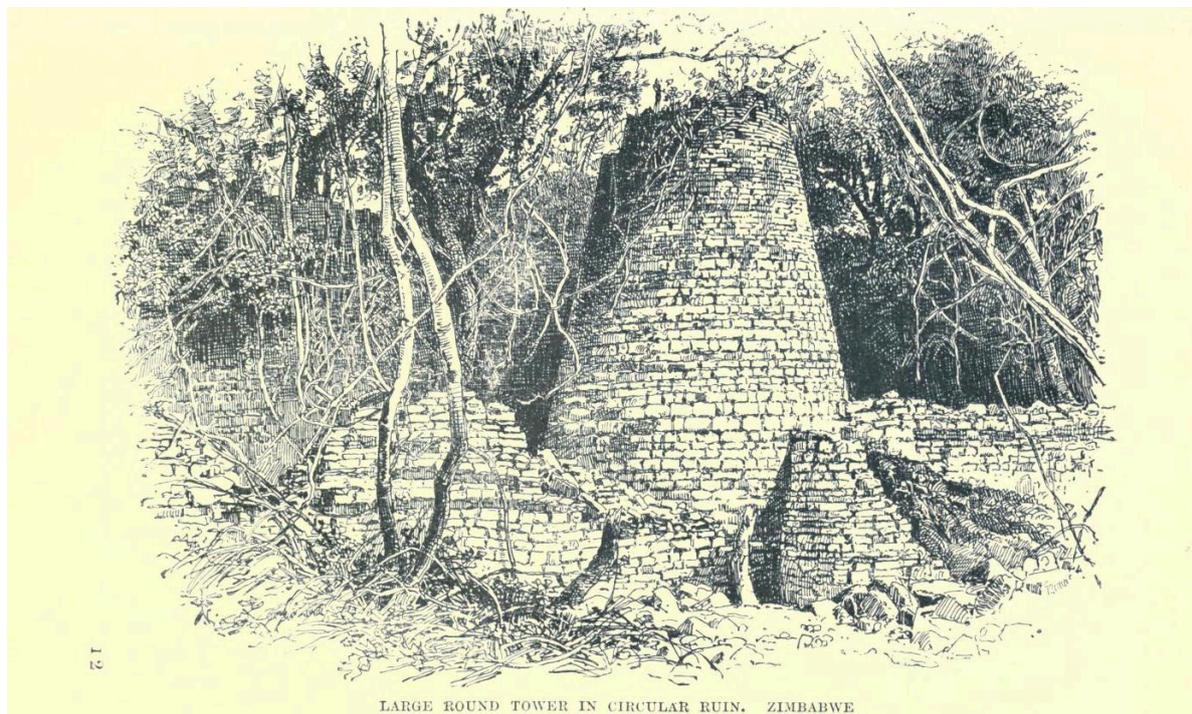
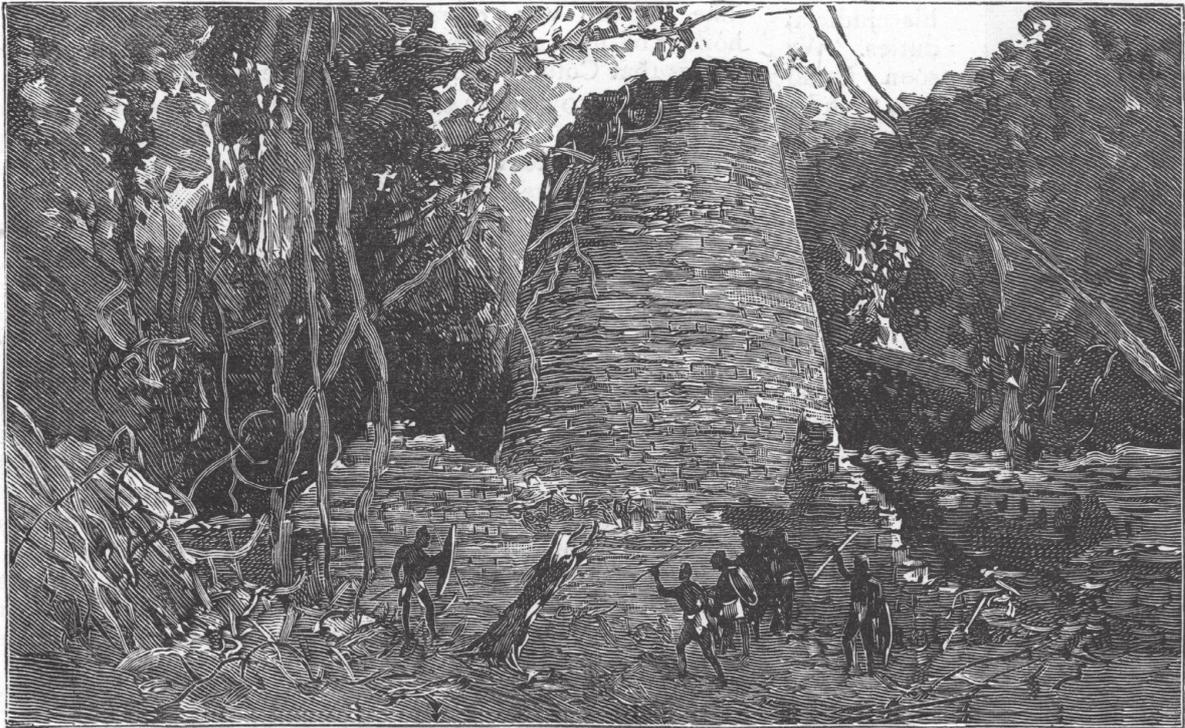


Figure 1: “Large Round Tower in Circular Ruin, Zimbabwe,” etching based on Mabel Bent’s photograph as printed in Theodore Bent’s *The Ruined Cities of Mashonaland*, p. 113. Image reproduced from the Internet Archive.



THE ROUND TOWER IN THE RUINS OF THE GREAT CIRCULAR TEMPLE

Figure 2: “The Round Tower in the Ruins of the Great Circular Temple,” etching based on Mabel Bent’s photograph as printed in British weekly illustrated newspaper *The Graphic*, 27 Feb. 1891, p. 268. A group of people was added to this etching. Image reproduced by curtesy of the Bent Archive.

Besides photography, Mabel Bent engaged in knowledge production in various other respects. Her letters and diaries, written for her friends and family and consulted by Theodore Bent while preparing his academic manuscripts, are highly engaged in the propagation of racializing knowledge. Being formed by the discourse of her time as well as forming it, Mabel Bent’s accounts of Ndebele and Shona-speaking people exhibit the mechanisms of British racial paternalism. Their depiction falls into line with stereotypes popular throughout Europe at the time such as Africans being “brutish, dimwitted, naive, emotional, undisciplined, [and] uncultured,” to borrow from Bernth Lindfors’s apt summary (54).

Bent’s diary repeatedly resorts to the equation of Black Africans with either animals or children, cognitive models that Patrick Colm Hogan identified as central to the creation of out-groups (33). They are, for instance, shown to be “gnawing” their food (86) or “dancing war dances like wild things,” which is authoritatively reinforced with an added “which they are” (95). The implicit divide between “Us” and “Them” that structures much of the text perhaps becomes most obvious

in the reflection on a particularly challenging trail section in the wagons: “It was wretched for men and cattle and anxious for us” (55). Conceptually, the Black workers who accompanied the Bent expedition are grouped with the party’s cattle and set against a “we” that is not further specified but usually refers to the Bents and Robert Swan, the cartographer. Within othering discourses, this is a standard form of representation that rests on the constructed dichotomy of civilization on the one side and savagery, wilderness, and nature on the other.

The grouping together of “men and cattle” in the context of physically straining labor also points at what has previously been observed about colonial discourse (see for example, Schriber 86–89), which is the way that racial constructions are bound up with notions of class. This holds true for Mabel Bent’s diaries. While the discourse it creates around lower-class Black people and Black elites is similarly derogatory and engages in various ways of othering, it hinges on different vehicles. As seen above, the former are metaphorically conceptualized as animals, and the latter, on the other hand, as children.

It is specifically in the description of such elites that the text displays deliberate efforts to rhetorically undermine their authority. It does so by making use of infantilizing discourse. For instance, Mabel Bent writes of Chief Montshiwa that “he was much interested in [her] eyeglass and roared with laughter when [she] let it fall” (95), and describes Chief Mutoko’s supposed reaction to a gift of needles like a child’s in writing that “he really beamed all over and grabbed at them with genuine pleasure ...” (133). Such representation fed into the paradigm of the primitive savage in need of civilization and domestication in the form of British tutelage. It formed the backdrop to narratives of British benevolence and colonialism as a force of progress, narratives that morally justified colonial rule.

In writing racialized accounts of colonial subjects, Mabel Bent also fulfilled an obligation to her audience. From a letter dated 9 May 1891, it transpires that her sister Ethel did not find Bent’s letters quite “African” enough and complained that she writes “as if [she] were in London” (Bent, “Mabel Bent: Four ‘Mashonaland’ Letters” 167). Certain passages she pens in her diary thereafter go into more exoticizing detail, as, for example: “I had a headache. M[edzwandira] sat by my bed a little time making little groans and looking very sad. Oh! If I could have pictured this naked savage sighing over me, before I left home” (122). Distinctly more dramatic than her usual style, the passage provides her family with the eroticized image of the caring but speechless “savage” by her bedside. This might have served to satisfy her family’s hunger for the “exotic Other,” typical for the time and capitalized upon by London entertainment shows featuring Black

performers from Southern Africa since the middle of the century (see Lindfors). Knowledge production, then, was subject to discursive pressure in the form of metropolitan expectations and was enlisted to perpetuate the British construction of Southern Africa.

While in an immediate sense Mabel Bent's diary had only a limited readership, it also served her husband in the preparation of his manuscripts. Theodore Bent published 18 articles about their research in Zimbabwe, and his monograph *The Ruined Cities of Mashonaland*, first published in 1892, went through three editions and several reprintings, reaching a wide audience.⁶ Many passages in it can be traced to Mabel Bent's diary so that her racially charged and at times ridiculing ethnography shaped the representation of Ndebele and Shona-speaking people in Britain, as for example, when Theodore directly copies her offhand characterization of religious authority Mondoro's daughter as "enormously fat" (Mabel Bent 137, c.f. Theodore Bent 328). Appearing via proxy in publications masquerading as objective, scientific insight, Mabel Bent's work, then, served not only her husband in supplementing his field notes but also served the imperial project of subjugating Indigenous people through "knowing them."

A particularly colonially conditioned form of knowing the Other that gained momentum in the 19th century consisted in collecting the material culture of colonized people and exhibiting it in the rising institution of the museum. Although the couple collected arduously during their fieldwork in Zimbabwe, only little note is made of this in Mabel Bent's diaries. Their main interest consisted in what Theodore Bent calls "savage ornaments," meaning ethnographic objects. Concerning the acquisition circumstances, it seems that the Bents mostly traded or paid for the objects (Theodore Bent 313), but Theodore Bent also mentions having "annexed many snuff-boxes, knives, and other oddments" in Gona (258). At the Great Zimbabwe excavation site, however, objects were packed up and freely shipped to Europe. Notably, the Soapstone Birds of Great Zimbabwe were broken from their stelae despite the resistance of the local population (see Mabel Bent 88).

Of the objects, some were sent directly to museums, while others remained in the Bents' private London residence until the late 1920s, when Mabel Bent donated them to the British Museum shortly before her death. Today, over 320 objects from the Bents' expedition to Zimbabwe remain in the British Museum; among

6. For an extensive bibliography of Theodore Bent's publications see: "Bibliography." *Theodore and Mabel Bent*, The Bent Archive, 2019, tambent.com/bibliography/.

them are religious objects, clothes, musical instruments, jewelry, weaponry, bags, beads, and cooking equipment, all of which are attributed to the Shona. Most of the objects are in storage; as of this time (spring 2023) on display are a vessel and four different divination-tablets. Notably, there are no objects in the collection that speak to hybridization processes induced by contact with the colonizers, such as ornaments made of tin cans, which Mabel and Theodore Bent both describe. Thus, Mabel Bent participated in the European amassing of “authentic” cultural objects, authentic being shorthand for pre-contact. This assumed authenticity, which collectors like the Bents sought after, represented Indigenous groups as suspended in what Bernice Murphy calls a “historical present” and afforded metropolitan viewers maximal distance and differentiation from the Other.

More directly, Mabel Bent also disseminated object-based knowledge about others by hosting her own exhibition. In 1892, she and Theodore Bent opened up their London home and exhibited pieces collected on their various journeys. In a newspaper article from *The Illustrated Weekly Journal for the Gentlewoman*, which stylizes Mabel Bent as both a conservative, upper-class homemaker and adventurous exploreress, she is shown assuming authority, guiding the interviewer through the exhibition, and recounting travel stories (Snell Wood 621–22). Among the exhibits figured one of the Great Zimbabwe Soapstone Birds. Considering the native resistance to their removal and the subsequent symbolic meaning the birds took on as national symbols for pre- and post-independence Zimbabwe, their laissez-faire transport to a private home in London can be read as an ultimate demonstration of metropolitan power over the periphery.

On a structural level, the routine production of knowledge about Black subjects by white colonial agents, be it through writing, photographing, or collecting, results in unequal relations of credibility. As Loretta Todd puts it, “someone else becomes the expert on your experience and is deemed more knowledgeable about who you are than yourself” (24). In a broader sense, those who are implicated by epistemic injustice are “perceived as epistemically lesser” (Fricker 1), which, coupled with other forms of discrimination, can hinder their access to positions of knowing. Eventually, epistemic injustice marginalizes non-white knowledges, resulting in a self-perpetuating system of knowledge creation that has been dubbed a “monoculture of knowledge” (Brunner 19). The colonial representational practices of Mabel Bent ascribe wild, uncivilized, and infantile attributes to Shona-speaking and Ndebele people, contributing to pervasive stereotypes and disqualifying them as authorities of knowledge on a content and on a structural level. Lessening their claim to knowledge delegitimized Indige-

nous self-rule and was key to legitimizing imperial interference as a benevolent act in the name of progress. Being one of the first British colonial agents in the colony-in-the-making, Mabel Bent exercised an enormous amount of epistemic power with her cultural production.

“She sees after everything of the kind”: Domesticity on the Move

Mabel Bent was not only integral to the production of imperial knowledge, but she also made possible the expedition through what scholars have theorized as care work and reproductive labor (see England, and Duffy). *Hearth and Home* discloses: “In all these long and laborious journeys she was the only woman of the party, and frequently was obliged to cook and look after the domestic arrangements generally.” As mistress of a household, though this household may have been mobile, Mabel Bent fulfilled duties traditionally expected from women of her class. She oversaw servants and took on the financial and internal management of the expedition in a way that opens up comparisons of the station wagons the party travels in to the Bents’ London home. Thus, when asked about what provisions they take on their journey, Theodore avows in an interview: “I always leave the commissariat side of our journey to my wife ... She sees after everything of the kind.” An 1895 article on her in the *Newry Telegraph* reports:

Every detail concerning the outfit and internal economy of their expedition is left by Mr Theodore Bent to his wife, and so on her hangs the heavy responsibility of keeping in health and making comfortable a larger or smaller party, which often included guides and servants belonging to the country which is to be explored.

Accordingly, Bent’s diary is peppered with records of expenses and hires made, wages promised, and meals planned and taken (though in keeping with her class not prepared by her). Even on the road, Mabel Bent was concerned with home-making, such as decorating the party’s excavation camp with lush greenery and flowers (Theodore Bent 60). Notwithstanding the restrictions imposed by this unconventional domestic space, she worked—and made others work—to make it hospitable: “I asked for a lot of packing cases ... to make furniture as I want to build another house, as we have so many visitors and every board we have is used up” (93–94).

This statement brings into view the store Bent set by hosting guests. She kept copious notes of her social life, the names of people met and favors received. At the excavation site at Great Zimbabwe, the Bents’ camp became a destination for those in the colony-in-the-making who wanted to see the famed ruins, so that

the couple almost daily received guests, who had to be hosted and entertained. 19th-century etiquette was adamant as to the subtleties of social exchanges as *The Book of Household Management* for women explains: “Visits of ceremony, or courtesy, which occasionally merge into those of friendship, are to be paid under various circumstances. Thus, they are uniformly required after dining at a friend’s house, or after a ball, picnic, or any other party” (88). Although some of the more rigid codes loosened with the progressing century and some could hardly apply during the Zimbabwe expedition, calling and entertaining were still essential to Mabel Bent’s duties. She kept up social decorum at the colonial periphery even to a comical extent. Returning the favor of having been hosted by former Bechuanaland Assistant Commissioner J. M. Wright and his family, Bent organizes her own tea party—to be held in a tent:

we ... had a tea party in the tent. We have 6 chairs, 3 long, 3 high. Mrs. and Miss Keys (Mr. W’s mother-in-law and our hostess), Mr. Parkes, the banker, Mr. Reid, Mr. Wright and I occupied these and the hosts sat on a bank outside and we had some English cake. (53)

Yet fostering relationships in the colony-in-the-making was about more than social expectations; it ensured survival. The Bents’ network comprised businessmen, members of the newly established British South Africa Company Police, nuns, missionaries, military personnel, and politicians, representing the whole breadth of colonial roles. Notable names include Cecil Rhodes himself, John Moffat, or the first Bishop of Mashonaland, the Bishop of Bloemfontein. This network of white colonists supplied the Bents with information, interpreters, equipment, and military safeguarding. It also provided them with coffee and tea, bread and butter, tomatoes, cucumbers, lemons, pomegranates, and countless luncheons and dinners, which undoubtedly lightened the burden on their travel budget. Most crucially, during their journey in 1891, parts of Zimbabwe were hit with a bout of food scarcity, and it was their network that saved the Bents when they ran out of food:

Before we had stopped [at Fort Salisbury], we were greeted by Dr. Harris and Captain Nesbitt and we and Mr. Swan were invited to take our meals at their mess during our stay. This invitation is of great monetary benefit to us, besides we could not get the food even if we did pay for it. Provisions are frightfully dear and scarce. (124)

Though taking place in an unconventional environment, actions like outfitting the expedition, seeing to the meals and comfort of the traveling party, and entertaining guests all constitute conventional care-related work. In that respect they comply with 19th-century ideas of a woman’s purpose, which is always set as a complement to male intellect and action:

There is nowhere, perhaps, a more beautiful instance of complementary adjustment between the Male and the Female character, than that which consists in the predominance of the Intellect and Will, which is required to make a *man* successful in the “battle of life,” and of the lively Sensibility, the quick Sympathy, the unselfish Kindliness, which give to *woman* the power of making the happiness of the home, and promoting the purest pleasures of social existence (417),

as the physiologist W. B. Carpenter writes in his influential *Principles of Mental Physiology* (first published in 1874). Supposedly scientific treatises like his made of women the perfect creatures of service, an ideology driven home by conduct books such as the aforementioned *Book of Household Management*.⁷ “The modest virgin, the prudent wife, and the careful matron, are much more serviceable in life than petticoated philosophers, blustering heroines, or virago queens” (80). Along these lines, the press reported on Mabel Bent to have taken care of fever-ridden men in her traveling party, having “ministered to their wants with sweet, sympathetic care” (“Mr Theodore Bent” 9). Semi-privately, however, Mabel Bent made sure to get across to her audience that she neither restricted herself to “lively Sensibility” nor was less “successful in the ‘battle of life’” than her husband, as W. B. Carpenter would have it. Her travel narrative is populated with crocodiles, snakes, lions, and hyenas, all of which she withstands unflinchingly, just as she endures being “jolted, jammed, jarred, rattled, shaken, squeezed, jumped, bumped, bruised, knocked, tossed and humbled” in the station wagon (84). She likes to boast of her superior riding skills, mocking a fellow traveler, a Mr. King, who “got a good ducking” (114) when he could not manage a difficult river crossing that she herself had easily mastered. Of her own misfortune she writes unsentimentally, so when she sprained an ankle, she remarks only, “I found walking or moving very painful but as it was not dangerous we none of us cared” (120).

For Bent, publicly taking on the role of prudent wife who followed her husband in his professional pursuits allowed her to be her own story’s “blustering heroine” without falling prey to the ridicule single traveling women typically attracted. As Theodore avows, Mabel’s choice in lifestyle met with initial backlash against her trespassing of the ostensibly appropriate sphere for women’s activities, as “serious doubts as to the advisability of a lady undertaking such a journey were frequently brought before us at the outset” (4). Traveling as part of a husband-wife

7. Conduct literature that sketched out the field of “household management” as a suitable occupation for women has sometimes been read as an emancipatory project that strove to establish domestic economy under women’s authority as an equally important counterpart to the political economy associated with male activity that instead of limiting women’s spheres enlarged them (see Richardson chapter 2).↵

team and leaning into the public portrayal as a “plucky and resourceful wife” whose transgressing became acceptable because “Mr. Bent was comforted by [her] companionship” (“Our Booking-Office,” *Punch* 222) helped to dissolve patriarchal doubts about her aptness for travel.

However, there are instances in Bent’s diaries that suggest a certain exasperation with the work tied to her presumed role as journeying house mistress. At one point she confides: “I hope we shall have no visitors [today]” (103). Moreover, when she discloses that she “made some ‘scones,’ which only Theodore liked” (109), she unabashedly pokes fun at her domestic skills and distances herself from the role of homemaker. And when Theodore caught a fever, she takes only passing note of it, dedicating that day’s journal entry instead to candid accounts of the time she spent alone with the cartographer Robert Swan, dispensing with the image of fretting wife (73).

Despite Mabel’s self-fashioned unsentimentality, to all appearances the Bents had a companionate marriage. While I argue that her mobile domestic work as well as her knowledge work were a service to Theodore and his career, I do not mean to establish Mabel Bent as a meek housewife. If *service* sometimes implies a sense of submission, there is little trace of that in their personal and professional relationship. Rather, Mabel and Theodore Bent seem to have worked as a team, on par with each other. She was used to being included in all goings-on and decisions, in negotiations, diggings, and in the writing of book manuscripts. When she writes: “I sat with Mrs. Philips while T went to the post and I suppose got no letters for I have not had many words with him. Someone in the camp had asked him [Theodore] and Mr. Swan to dinner, so here I sit with my fire and lantern and have had my supper alone” (67), she displays an unusual tone of discontent in her otherwise harmonious account of their relationship. Her being left out of plans seems to be an exception that she takes offense with, rather than a common occurrence, an incident that allows some insight into their work and personal relationship. So does Theodore’s reflection on Mabel’s role in the introduction of his book:

My wife was the only one of our party who escaped fever, never having a day’s illness during the whole year that we were away from home. She was able to take a good many photographs under circumstances of exceptional difficulty, and instead of being, as was prophesied, a burden to the expedition, she furthered its interests and contributed to its ultimate success in more ways than one. (4–5)

He clearly valued her beyond the service of homemaking and companionship she provided and acknowledged her professional contribution as the expedition's photographer.

Beyond Service: Defying Gender Norms at the Colonial Periphery

In view of her service to the British Empire through the production of imperially-sanctioned knowledge and racial difference during the high period of imperialism, it is no surprise that Mabel Bent was, along with Isabella Bird and May French Sheldon, among the first cohorts of women to be considered for fellowship to the Royal Geographical Society in 1893. She was not admitted, nor would other women be for another twenty years. Mabel Bent feigned indifference:

As the recent verdict of the Royal Geographical Society against admitting ladies has been a topic freely discussed both socially and in the papers in connection with Mrs. Bent's name, I think this article would be incomplete without saying that she (to quote her own words) "has no yearning to be a Fellow", and the benefits already accorded by the Society are sufficient for her modest requirements. She is very reticent about her share in her husband's discoveries, and could never put herself forward in any way. (Snell Wood 622)

Bent's self-effacing gender performance in this excerpt from an 1893 article in the illustrated weekly *The Gentlewoman* starkly contrasts with the confident tone of her semi-private diaries and letters. Mabel Bent's portrayal and public self-representation, along with the Royal Geographical Society's refusal to grant fellowship to "ladies," is indicative of how women's active involvement in late-Victorian knowledge systems and their imperial service has been historically underrecognized.

Nevertheless, Mabel Bent draws attention to the "benefits already accorded by the Society," presumably referring to the funds and equipment they received for the expedition. Other than that, she also benefited in intangible ways, from both her service to the Empire and her service to her husband, calling into question the way female service is imbued with notions of self-sacrifice. Bent exploited her service relationships to fashion a life to her liking. In joining the expedition to Zimbabwe, she achieved an unusual range of personal freedom compared to many other Victorian women. According to a portrait in *The Gentlewoman at Home*, she was hungry for travel and extraordinariness, "from her earliest years having [had] a wish to see those distant lands where the ordinary traveller fears to tread." Marriage to the frequently traveling archaeologist Theodore was a highly advantageous match. In the same article, she is quoted as commenting on this relationship rather tongue-in-cheek: "And how fortunate that my husband's tastes should

be exactly the same as my own" (621-22). Their union gave her access to his network within learned societies, which were not yet ready to accept her as a female fellow, and opened up a life of at least partially institutionally-funded travel. It also provided an opportunity for her professional career in photography. Ultimately, it was in her own interest to perform the care-related work that she sometimes let on to dislike as it made possible an unconventional life.

Moving along the colonial periphery, Mabel Bent openly developed an intimate cross-gender friendship with a man outside of her marriage that included physical touch. Under the pretext of professional necessity, she and Robert Swan spent an inordinate amount of time as a pair riding out to scout the surroundings, or take photographs, or measure baobab trees, as she discloses in her journal. Such a friendship challenged the boundaries of socially sanctioned behavior between men and women. Moreover, at the periphery Bent gained access to male-coded spaces, like the military institution of the mess. Describing how the men laboriously planned for her presence in this all-male institution, she ridicules their obsession with the image of a woman in need of protection:

He [Major Tye of Fort Tuli] at once asked Mr. Swan to dine, but feared to ask T for fear of leaving me alone, but it was arranged that I should dine in Major Tye's hut alone. At long last, with much hesitation, I was asked to dine at the mess. I was reassuringly told that Major Tye would sit on one side and 'your husband on the other ...'. Eventually, T[heodore] was on Major Tye's right, I on his left and the stalwart Mr. Swan protected my other side. With a knife in my right hand, a fork in my left and the pepper pot quite handy, surely I might feel safe, and so it proved. (70)

Her imperial service, then, can be understood to be a testament to the undercurrent of her travel text: a challenge to preconceived notions of a woman's place. It gave her a space to defy gender conventions without risking her reputation.

I have shown how Bent's competencies in observing, writing, photographing, and managing the expedition functioned on several levels at once. Her actions should therefore be understood as taking place at the crossroad of service to the empire, service to her husband, and self-interest. These different modes are not always clearly separable as supporting her husband in his career in less obvious ways also benefitted the colonial project. The same is true for the other modes: Actions from which she benefitted may also be understood as having advanced her husband's career as well as the colonial penetration of Zimbabwe.

Notwithstanding the unusual range of agency Mabel Bent gained from her gendered performance of service, in her cultural production she was complicit in a system of colonial exploitation. Her diaries and photographs, and her collecting and exhibiting provided a wider British public with epistemologically violent images of the empire's Other as different from the imperial self. Her representational practices marked the Other as uncivilized and infantile, perpetuated white superiority, appealed to narratives of guided progress and British benevolence, and served the British Empire as moral justification for colonial rule.

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