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**‘Round the World for Birth Control’:
Imperial Feminism and the Birth Control
Movement, 1930-1939**

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**‘Round the World for Birth Control’: Imperial Feminism and the
Birth Control Movement, 1930-1939.**

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Introduction

As a young woman living in twenty-first century Britain, the access to birth control has been a certainty. My feminist beliefs have led me to confidently assert that birth control is an essential facet of women's liberation. When I first read Jane Carey's article, 'The Racial Imperatives of Sex', which argued the origins of birth control were primarily eugenic rather than arising from a feminist movement, my unquestioned assumptions about the history of birth control – as a history of women fighting for sexual, reproductive and bodily autonomy – were confronted. What I have since discovered, is a history of birth control much murkier and more complex than I had previously realised. This dissertation considers the imperial context of the British birth control movement.

Using the work of British suffragette and birth control organiser, Edith How-Martyn (1875-1954), this work examines the international work of the birth control movement in the 1930s. During this decade, Edith How-Martyn worked with two birth control groups: the Birth Control International Information Centre (BCIIC), which was founded by Edith How-Martyn and American birth control activist, Margaret Sanger, in 1930, and the Birth Control Worldwide group (BCW), formed by Edith How-Martyn in 1936, after an expenses scandal led to How-Martyn's departure from her directorial position of the BCIIC. Under the auspices of both groups, How-Martyn travelled internationally to spread the message of birth control.

Through examining the work of Edith How-Martyn, this dissertation considers the dovetail of birth control campaigns, feminism and imperialism. Having been a suffragette, and a self-described feminist, Edith How-Martyn offers an ideal case study to examine the relationship between feminism and the birth control movement (although of course she cannot be taken as representative of all feminists or birth control advocates). Thus, in part, international birth control tours are used as a lens through which to examine the nature of Western feminism in the 1930s. This dissertation will emphasize that the birth control movement emerged out of an imperial context, and will examine the imperial assumptions that formed the foundation of Edith How-Martyn's engagement with international

birth control tours. Therefore, I argue that the international birth control movement in the 1930s was defined by its imperial context.

This research is at the intersection of the history of birth control and histories of women and empire, therefore it is meaningful to consider the historiography of both areas. Histories of birth control have been written as long as birth control has been seen as an important subject of debate, and these histories reflect their contemporary climates. Norman Himes' 1936 *Medical History of Contraception*, aimed to establish contraception as a social phenomenon 'worthy of scientific sociological inquiry', by demonstrating contraceptive practices could be found within various cultures throughout history.¹ Later, Linda Gordon's *Woman's Body, Woman's Right* (1976) was informed by the contemporary debates regarding abortion rights taking place in the United Kingdom and United States. Reflecting the social turn of the 1960s, Gordon's work turned away from a technological or medical focus, or profiles of prominent individuals, and refocused on the women who sought sexual and reproductive self-determination, becoming the first work to address birth control as a social movement.²

The history of birth control has been a site on which something of a mini 'history wars' has been taking place regarding the relationship between eugenics and feminism.³ Linda Gordon suggested the prospect of a 'feminist eugenics' in *Woman's Body, Woman's Right*, but, as Richard Soloway noted in the mid 1990s, the 'uncomfortable relationship' between the birth control movement and eugenics had not yet been fully recognised.⁴ When discussed, eugenics was often argued to be aberrant rather than representative of birth control movements.⁵ Soloway,

¹ Norman Himes, *Medical History of Contraception* (London: George Allen and Unwin Ltd., 1936), p.xii.

² Linda Gordon, *Woman's Body, Woman's Right* (Penguin Books, 1977 [1976]), p.xi.

³ Jane Carey, 'The Racial Imperatives of Sex: birth control and eugenics in Britain, the United States and Australia in the interwar years', *Women's History Review* 25 (2012), p.734; Charles Valenza, 'Was Margaret Sanger a Racist?', *Family Planning Perspectives* 17 (1985). Valenza argued that Gordon took quotes from Sanger out of context to argue that she was a racist and eugenicist.

⁴ Gordon, *Woman's Body, Woman's Right*, pp.126-35; pp.282-90; Richard Soloway, 'The 'Perfect Contraceptive': Eugenics and Birth Control Research in Britain and America in the Interwar Years', *Journal of Contemporary History* 30 (1995).

⁵ Carey, 'Racial Imperatives of Sex', p.735; for example, Ellen Chesler, *Woman of Valour* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1992).

however, demonstrated that efforts to find a harmless and reliable contraceptive method were supported, financially and scientifically, by eugenic interests.⁶

Since then, historians have increasingly examined the relationship between eugenics and feminism. Angelique Richardson's *Love and Eugenics in the Late Nineteenth Century* (2003), explored the 'uncomfortable' history of the intimate relationships between eugenics and early feminist movements, pointing to a 'eugenic feminism' that emerged out of British concerns of racial decline and imperial loss.⁷ In 2007, Angela Wanhalla interrogated the relationship between feminism and eugenics in New Zealand, examining the ways female reformers, colonial feminists and female health and welfare workers engaged in eugenic debates in New Zealand during the first three decades of the twentieth-century.⁸ Jane Carey's 2012 article argued the birth control movement was primarily eugenically motivated, and advocates of birth control in Britain, the USA and Australia sought to advance (white) racial progress.⁹ Wanhalla and Carey examined 'white settler' locations, but there is overall a lack of international/transnational approaches to the history of birth control. One work that begins to fill this gap is Sanjam Ahluwalia's 2009 work on birth control in India during the colonial period, which assessed the involvement of Western birth control advocates in promoting contraceptive usage.¹⁰

I seek to place this research within the existing historical scholarship regarding gender and imperialism. Born out of the growth of women's and gender history, and the development of new histories of imperialism, gender and imperialism emerged as field of study in 1980s. Amongst these works were those which sought to 'recover' women or 'recuperate' women's roles in the history of imperialism, but the ways in which white women were centred, 'confirm[ed] and

⁶ Soloway, 'The 'Perfect Contraceptive''.

⁷ Angelique Richardson, *Love and Eugenics in the Late Nineteenth Century: Rational Reproduction and the New Woman* (Oxford University Press, 2003), p.9.

⁸ Angela Wanhalla, 'To "Better the Breed of Men": women and eugenics in New Zealand, 1900-1935', *Women's History Review* 16 (2007), pp.163-82.

⁹ Carey, 'Racial Imperatives of Sex'.

¹⁰ Sanjam Ahluwalia, *Reproductive Restraints: Birth Control in India 1877-1947* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2008), pp.54-84.

continue[d] the invisibility of black people, and especially black women.’¹¹ This kind of Eurocentric approach feminist history was criticised by Valerie Amos and Pratibha Parmar, who coined the idea of ‘imperial feminism’.¹² Antoinette Burton argued for approached to the history of women and imperialism that acknowledge the imperial legacies of Anglo-European feminism.¹³ Highlighting British feminists’ collaboration with the ideologies of imperialism, Antoinette Burton’s *Burdens of History* (1994) aimed to relocate British feminist ideologies in their imperial context, and problematized Western feminists’ historical relationship to imperial culture at home.¹⁴ She demonstrated the nineteenth-century women’s movement in Britain had, ‘recognisably imperial concerns and sympathies.’¹⁵ In addition to Burton’s work, Vron Ware and Kumari Jayawardena researched British and Western women who travelled, worked and interacted with areas of the ‘global south’ during the colonial period.¹⁶

There is not yet a comprehensive study of Edith How-Martyn’s work with the birth control movement. Sanjam Ahluwalia’s study only addressed How-Martyn’s work in India, and while her work in India was a vastly important part of her international activity, it was one part amongst many. This project addresses a wider range of activity than has previously been assessed: the work of the BCIC and BCW groups at home in London; the Round the World for Birth Control Tour to multiple countries in South and South East Asia, and North America, undertaken by Edith How-Martyn and Margaret Sanger (1934-1935); multiple tours by Edith How-Martyn to India between 1934 and 1938; and How-Martyn’s three-month lecture tour of Jamaica in 1939. This work uses a two-chapter structure to consider two key ideas or themes that emerged from the source

¹¹ Jane Haggis, ‘Gendering colonialism or colonising gender? Recent women’s studies approaches to white women and the history of British colonialism’, *Women’s Studies International Forum*, 13 (1990), p.113.

¹² Valerie Amos and Pratibha Parmar, ‘Challenging Imperial Feminism’, *Feminist Review* 17 (1984).

¹³ Antoinette Burton, “‘History’ is Now: feminist theory and the production of historical feminisms”, *Women’s History Review* 1 (1992).

¹⁴ Antoinette Burton, *Burdens of History British Feminists, Indian Women, and Imperial Culture, 1865-1915* (University of North Carolina Press, 1994).
(; Vron Ware, *Beyond the Pale* (London: Verso, 1992).

¹⁵ Burton, *Burdens of History*, p.63.

¹⁶ Vron Ware, *Beyond the Pale* (London: Verso, 1992); Kumari Jayawardena, *The White Woman’s Other Burden* (London and New York: Routledge, 1995).

material. Chapter One will discuss the ‘international’ nature of the birth control movement. It will consider the meanings of ‘internationalism’ for British birth control reformers, and will suggest that their understandings of internationalism and their international goals were defined by ongoing British imperial ideology. Chapter Two goes on to examine the significance of notions of progress, modernity, and civilisation to the ideology and rhetoric of birth control reformers. It will suggest that birth controllers’ use of these ideas demonstrate an expression of imperialism. Furthermore, Chapter Two highlights the connection between eugenic ideology and imperialist notions of civilisation and progress. Both chapters comment on Edith How-Martyn’s feminism, which was defined by the context of British imperialism.

The source base for this dissertation comes primarily from the Eileen Palmer Collections at the Wellcome Library, London. Eileen Palmer worked closely with Edith How-Martyn throughout the 1930s, and guarded this collection of How-Martyn’s correspondence, published and unpublished writing until shortly before her death in 1992. Before making their way into Eileen Palmer’s collection, many of the sources I have examined were produced through How-Martyn’s own curation. Her travel journals, which include newspaper cuttings, records of meetings and conversation, photographs and postcards, are by their very nature curated. This dissertation examines the self-image of British birth controllers; the curation and pre-selectivity is useful to explore how Western birth controllers perceived themselves.

Now, Palmer remains a curator of the material: in places, she removed parts of letters by crossing out or with scissors; and her own annotations and short descriptions on envelopes guide the researcher through the sources. It is impossible not to be guided by Palmer’s curation, and unfortunately researchers cannot access material Palmer deemed too sensitive, or perhaps unflattering of herself or her colleagues. The collection nonetheless provides ample material, and Palmer’s curation, like How-Martyn’s, provides insight into how Western birth controllers perceived themselves, and wanted to be perceived by others.

Chapter One: An ‘International’ Birth Control Movement

A movement which by its very human appeal can surmount all barriers of language, religion and special customs; a movement which has grown from the necessity of solving a problem universal as life itself, regardless of particular racial or national facets; international birth control, birth control world-wide, is indeed a concept to stir the imagination.¹⁷

This description of an international birth control movement demonstrates a universalist view, and a vision of internationalism whereby national ‘barriers’ are overcome. This chapter will examine the meanings of internationalism in Edith How-Martyn’s international birth control advocacy. It will draw attention to the extensive knowledge networks that existed internationally, and will examine how Western birth controllers interacted with their non-Western counterparts.¹⁸ The chapter will also turn attention to Edith How-Martyn’s feminism, and will examine how her feminism was shaped by imperialist ideology.

Since the ‘transnational turn’ of the 1990s, ‘transnational’ historical approaches have sought to refocus historical study away from ‘the nation’ and towards supra- and sub-state fields of history.¹⁹ It might then seem old-fashioned or obscure to refer here to ‘internationalism’,²⁰ but the term has a particular significance to the interwar context, as noted, for example, by Emily Baughan, who argued that during the interwar period, humanitarian groups were involved in ‘reimagining the British empire as a peaceable, moral force, which exemplified the co-operative spirit of internationalism.’²¹ The origins of ‘internationalism’ are found in the aspiration for world peace, and in the notion of world citizenship inscribed in the new international structures that had been created in the aftermath of the First World War, for example the League of Nations.²² In the

¹⁷ ‘Round the World for Birth control, with Margaret Sanger and Edith How-Martyn: An account of an international tour’ (London: Birth Control International Information Centre, c.1937), p.6, PP/EPR/C.2/7a, Archives and Manuscripts Collection at the Wellcome Library for the History and Understanding of Medicine, London.

¹⁸ I use ‘non-Western’ for want of a better term.

¹⁹ Patricia Clavin, ‘Conceptualising Internationalism Between the World Wars’, in *Internationalism Reconfigured: Transnational Ideas and Movements Between the World Wars*, ed. by Daniel Laqua (London and New York: I.B Tauris, 2011), p.1.

²⁰ Clavin, ‘Conceptualising Internationalism’, p.5.

²¹ Emily Baughan, ‘Empire, internationalism and the Save the Children Fund in inter-war Britain’, *Institute of Historical Research* 86 (2012), p.116.

²² Clavin, ‘Conceptualising Internationalism’, pp.5-6.

interwar period, individuals, groups and associations made efforts to interact with these new international structures.²³ This chapter examines how Edith How-Martyn and her colleagues interacted with the notion of internationalism itself.

The records of Edith How-Martyn's work in the birth control movement during the 1930s expose the vast international networks of the birth control movement. One example of how these networks operated was the sharing of information through personal correspondence. A letter from Olive Johnson in April 1939 demonstrates she had been sending copies of the *New Generation* to six different correspondences in India since January 1938. The same letter indicates that Edith How-Martyn shared her network of contacts: she sent lists of her birth control contacts in Jamaica to people who wanted to find out about birth control or use facilities provided by birth control clinics. Ahead of Mrs. Racoosin's visit to Australia, Johnson sent her a list of contacts in Australia and some in New Zealand.²⁴ Through personal correspondences, including sending each other copies of journals, birth controllers were able to ensure the sharing of information and views on birth control across national boundaries.²⁵ The importance of personal correspondence to feminist and women's movements has been noted by Joan Marie Johnson, who highlighted the 'social networks of power created by wealthy women'.²⁶ Therefore, the methods employed by Edith How-Martyn and other (particularly female) birth control advocates, indicate a similarity to wider feminist/women's movements.

In addition to personal correspondences, various publications and journals that promoted population and fertility control reveal international networks. Sanger's *Birth Control Review* (first published in January 1917) saw regular contributions from Goplajee Ahluwalia and Dr. Aliyappin Padmanabha Pillay,

²³ Daniel Laqua, *Internationalism Reconfigured*, p.xii.

²⁴ Olive Johnson to Edith How-Martyn (EHM), 25 April 1939, PP/EPR/D.1/5. Note: where sources did not reveal full names, I refer people as they are named in the sources.

²⁵ In her analysis of Japanese birth control advocate and feminist, Ishimoto Shizue, Elise Tipton also noted the significance of personal networks across national boundaries in the spread of feminist ideas in the early twentieth-century, Elise K. Tipton, 'Ishimoto Shizue: The Margaret Sanger of Japan', *Women's History Review* 6 (1997).

²⁶ Joan Marie Johnson, *Funding feminism: monied women, philanthropy, and the women's movement, 1870–1967* (University of North Carolina Press, 2017).

both Indian advocates of birth control who were active in eugenics societies.²⁷ Pillay's prestigious international journal, *Marriage Hygiene*, was highly respected and disseminated in the United States, Britain and other areas of Europe. Edith How-Martyn described the journal as 'first class', and it was rated by Havelock Ellis as being one of the best journals of its kind in the English language.²⁸ These journals reveal one example of the 'symbiotic relationship' between Western advocates and their Indian allies, as Western and non-Western birth controllers collaborated, corresponded and wrote for each other's journals.²⁹

However, Sanjam Ahluwalia's research demonstrates a murkier situation than Edith How-Martyn's records suggest. She noted that Western birth controllers tried to retain leadership of organisations and international forums, citing, for instance, correspondence between Norman Himes and Edward Griffiths, the American and British editors of *Marriage Hygiene*, which reveals efforts to move the headquarters of the journal to either Britain or the United States.³⁰ As such, Western birth control advocates aimed to place themselves at the centre of the international birth control movement, and international collaborative efforts were framed by race politics and Western birth control advocates' imperialist notions of Western superiority. Ahluwalia's work also reminds us that Edith How-Martyn's records have been curated to demonstrate an idealist vision of international cooperation.

International travel for tours and conferences was another method of 'internationalism'. Edith How-Martyn's international birth control tours provided a platform for a wider international feminist consciousness to be fostered. As well as giving lectures on population control and contraception, How-Martyn often gave public talks that addressed the women's movement more widely, which often focused on the suffrage movement in Britain and America, and her own role as a suffragette. One month into her 1939 Jamaica tour, How-Martyn gave an address at a women's club on 'Women's Movements Throughout the World'. These speeches

²⁷ David Kennedy, *Birth Control in America: The Career of Margaret Sanger* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1970), p.88; Sanjam Ahluwalia, *Reproductive Restraints: Birth Control in India 1877-1947* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2008), pp.28-9.

²⁸ Edith How-Martyn Broadcast, Bombay, February 1937, PP/EPR/C.2.

²⁹ Ahluwalia, *Reproductive Restraints*, p.55.

³⁰ Ahluwalia, *Reproductive Restraints*, pp.63-4.

are an example of how knowledge of global feminist movements was shared internationally. While How-Martyn's address covered her own perceptions of the position of women in India and China, based on her previous travels there, her speech was primarily focused on Britain. Through this, How-Martyn centred the metropole at the heart of the women's movement. Thus, Edith How-Martyn's speeches facilitated the sharing of knowledge about women's movements across national boundaries, but represented Britain at the centre.

It is important to note the two-way travel that existed between metropole and colonies. As well as Edith How-Martyn and other Western birth controllers visiting non-Western countries and areas of empire, non-Western birth controllers visited London. London was an important centre for the international birth control movement. As the imperial metropolitan centre, it was connected to all areas of the British empire and beyond. Bourbonnais has noted that most Jamaican birth control advocates in the late 1930s had been educated in London.³¹ In November 1933, the BCIIC organised a conference on Birth Control in Asia which held at the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine. The conference was attended by representatives from Japan, China, South Africa and India, as well as Britain. Non-western students and professionals travelled from colony to metropole to engage in birth control advocacy, and the sharing of birth control knowledge. In May 1937, Lady Cowasjee Jehangir, the president of the Bombay Birth Control Clinic, visited Edith How-Martyn and the BCW group in London. Later that same summer, Mrs Datta visited the BCW group with a party of twenty-three female Indian students as part of an 'Education Tour of Europe for Indian Women Students and Teachers.'³² The students were taken to visit the BCW library, which consisted of collections of their publications and birth control information.³³ After their visit to London, Mrs Datta wrote to How-Martyn reflecting, 'it meant a good deal to see the girls to see the Women's Service House and to understand something of what is being done there.'³⁴ International travel as a means of

³¹ Nicole Bourbonnais, "'Dangerously Large": The 1938 Labor Rebellion and the Debate over Birth Control in Jamaica', *New West Indian Guide* 83 (2009), p.53.

³² Record of Birth Control Worldwide Luncheons, October 1936 – November 1938, p.29, PP/EPR/F.2 (from here referenced, 'BCW luncheons').

³³ BCW luncheons, p.29.

³⁴ Mrs. Datta to EHM 11 April 1938 PP/EPR/F.2.

knowledge sharing, was thus perceived as integral to the birth control movement. It is important to note that Indian women travelling to Britain on an educational visit would most likely have been wealthy, educated, and middle- or upper-class. Therefore, while this visit demonstrates that birth control knowledge was shared across racial and national boundaries, there is little or no evidence of the BCIIC or BCW seeking to transcend class barriers.

Edith How-Martyn's involvement in the birth control movement was, in many ways, characteristic of women's movements and feminist organizations in the inter-war period. Marie Sandell's examination of the internationalism and international expansion of women's organisations in the interwar period notes that internationalist women's organisations were fostered through: world tours, which became one way of making contact with places that were not well represented; personal connections and friendships; the distribution of journals; and attendance at conferences where potential members might be immersed in a 'spirit of internationalism'.³⁵ Accepting her claims, it can be seen through Edith How-Martyn's work, that the birth control movement engagement with internationalism mirrored the wider engagement of women's organisations with internationalism in the interwar period.

Internationalism was integral to the organisational identity of the BCIIC and the BCW group, and as such, both groups performed and displayed internationalism. The BCIIC even emphasised their international connections in their writing paper. Their letterhead in December 1933 included a list of fourteen cities globally in which they had connections, by the end of 1934, this list had expanded to include some twenty-seven countries, and in 1936 the list numbered thirty-two.³⁶ Similarly, in an entry of the BCW meetings book from December 1937, How-Martyn listed the names of all the attendees followed by their nationality, and emphasised the presence of '6 nationalities' at the meeting.³⁷ As

³⁵ Marie Sandell, "A Real Meeting of the Women of the East and the West." Women and Internationalism in the Interwar Period', in *Internationalism Reconfigured: Transnational Ideas and Movements Between the World Wars*, ed. by Daniel Laqua (London and New York: I.B. Tauris, 2011), pp.165-6.

³⁶ For example, EHM to C.P. Blacker, 27 December 1933; Eileen Palmer to C.P. Blacker, 12 November 1934; Eleanor Hawarden to C.P. Blacker, 18 August 1936, Eugenics Society Archives, SA/EUG/D/12/14.

³⁷ BCW luncheons, p.47.

well as showing the actual international connections of the groups, the emphasis on the internationality of the group demonstrates how important internationalism was for the group's own identity.

When they were not travelling, Edith How-Martyn and her fellow birth controllers in Britain fostered a distinctly international atmosphere to their work in London. More often than not, meetings of the BCW group involved a lecture or discussion on the birth control situation abroad. In December 1936, Mrs McCullum gave a speech on social conditions in Burma; in February 1937 Mrs. Whitehead, who had been President of the Madras Social Service, and whose husband was the Bishop of Madras, gave a speech on the 'fundamental principles of social service in India.'³⁸ At the meetings of the BCIIC and BCW group, letters bearing news from members travelling internationally was often shared.³⁹ Before embarking on her journey to India in November 1934, 'all interested in birth control in India' were invited to attend an 'Indian dinner' held in London in honour of Edith How-Martyn, at which 'Indian music' and an 'Indian menu' was provided.⁴⁰ These examples reveal that the BCIIC and BCW groups displayed their international connections and performed internationalism.

Beyond being part of an internationalist agenda, Western birth controllers had their own personal motivations for travelling internationally. Ahluwalia has noted one aspect of the appeal of international travel in empire was the prospect of the 'material and affective benefits accrued to famous white women doing social work in the colonies'.⁴¹ In her analysis of letters from Margaret Sanger to her husband from a trip to India she took from December 1935 to January 1936, Ahluwalia noted the 'exclusive treatment she was accorded by Indian princes and elite members'.⁴² Similarly, How-Martyn's records reveal the appeal of special treatment she received on her international tours. In an interview about her 1939 tour of Jamaica, Edith How-Martyn commented that her work was 'amply repaid

³⁸ BCW luncheons, p.9,12.

³⁹ For example, EHM to BCIIC, 2 April 1936, PP/EPR/H.2/7; BCW Luncheons, p.47.

⁴⁰ Invitation to 'Indian Dinner' 19 November 1934, SA/EUG/D/12/14.

⁴¹ Ahluwalia, *Reproductive Restraints*, pp.59-60.

⁴² Ahluwalia, *Reproductive Restraints*, p.60.

with their affection,' and she 'had never received so many presents in her life as in Jamaica.'⁴³ How-Martyn's international travel afforded material benefits in the form of gifts, which alongside receiving 'affection', also afforded her affective benefits, demonstrating the privilege and prestige white British women could achieve through travel in the colonies.

The documentation of the Jamaica tour further reveals the importance of publicity and press attention to Edith How-Martyn. Filled with press cuttings from her trip to Jamaica, How-Martyn's own journals reveal the delight she took in being in the media's eye. The day following her arrival, her photograph appeared in the *Jamaica Standard*.⁴⁴ In her journal, she wrote how 'delightful' it was to be met off the boat by about a dozen people including a photographer.⁴⁵ Intriguingly, How-Martyn wrote of 'Miss Aimee Webster who was seen to be interviewing me.'⁴⁶ The emphasis on having been *seen* to have been interviewed, rather than the fact of being interviewed, is significant. Being seen to be interviewed demonstrated a certain level of authority and power possessed by How-Martyn as a white British woman visiting Jamaica to ostensibly undertake social work. The admiration afforded by the press was a personal motivation for How-Martyn to travel internationally in the British colonies.

Furthermore, through her involvement with the birth control movement, Edith How-Martyn could gain recognition as a 'prominent British feminist' due to her suffragette activism.⁴⁷ How-Martyn's prior experience as a suffragette gave her authority in Jamaica which, at the time of her visit, was experiencing debates about women's enfranchisement. A press cutting in How-Martyn's journal reported she had been 'responsible for the raising of the first woman candidate for election in Jamaica', and cited How-Martyn as solely responsible for arranging the first Jamaican women's conference, which took place in February 1939.⁴⁸ In reality, both monumental events – the election of Mary Morris Knibb, and the first Jamaican Women's Conference – were organised collaboratively by the Jamaica

⁴³ 'Jamaica Women's Status', *The Hornsey Journal*, 1 March 1940, PP/EPR/C.5.

⁴⁴ 'Birth Control Lecturer', *Jamaica Standard*, 5 January 1939, PP/EPR/C.5.

⁴⁵ Edith How-Martyn, *Jamaica Travel Journal* PP/EPR/C.5.

⁴⁶ EHM, *Jamaica Travel Journal*.

⁴⁷ EHM, *Jamaica Travel Journal*.

⁴⁸ 'Jamaica Women's Status'.

Women's Liberal Club, which had been formed by a small group of Jamaican women teachers in 1937.⁴⁹ Edith How-Martyn's acceptance of sole credit seems to conflict with statements she made regarding the importance of collaboration, revealing the tension that sometimes existed between internationalist discourses and the desire for personal gain and recognition, which was particularly significant in the colonial context: Edith How-Martyn, a white British woman, was granted recognition for the labour and efforts of colonised women of colour.

On return from her trip to Jamaica, Edith How-Martyn used her experience and newfound 'expertise' on the colony to establish herself as an authority on Jamaica. In March 1940, she spoke at the Hornsey branch of the National Council of Women about women in Jamaica.⁵⁰ Furthermore, Edith How-Martyn used the authority and cultural capital she gained through international travel to engage with political structures at home. In May 1939, F. A. Norman was appointed as Labour Advisor to the Government of Jamaica and was tasked with organising a Labour Department.⁵¹ Correspondence between How-Martyn and Norman reveal that How-Martyn used her experience of travelling in the colony to advise the newly appointed Labour Advisor, and make connections and introductions between him and her own associates in Jamaica. Norman thanked How-Martyn for '[taking] so much trouble in the way of giving me particulars of people in Jamaica whom I ought to meet.'⁵² They met at least once and later exchanged letters, in which they also discussed the question of women's enfranchisement and the situation regarding trade unions in Jamaica.⁵³ How influential this was, or how much political power it wielded in real terms is undeterminable from these letters alone, but it does reveal that as a result of having travelled in the colonies, Edith How-Martyn gained access to officials and politicians with whom she otherwise might not have had contact. In this way, British women who travelled in the empire felt they could engage with institutions of political power.

⁴⁹ Rhoda Reddock, 'Feminism Nationalism and the Early Women's Movement', in *Caribbean Women Writers: Essays from the First International Conference* ed. by Selwyn Cudjoe (Wellesley: Calaloux Publications, 1990), pp.67-74.

⁵⁰ 'Jamaica Women's Status'.

⁵¹ Hansard, HC (10 May 1939) <<https://api.parliament.uk/historic-hansard/commons/1939/may/10/labour-adviser>> [accessed 20 January 2019].

⁵² F.A. Norman to EHM, 8 May 1939, PP/EPR/C.5

⁵³ F.A. Norman to EHM, 5, 8, 10 May 1939, PP/EPR/C.5.

As noted by Ahluwalia, ‘there were clearly multiple logics of power that drove the early Western advocates to widen their area of influence on a global scale.’⁵⁴ Edith How-Martyn’s international tours were in part motivated by the potential to acquire cultural capital and prestige. Moreover, her experiences abroad opened doors to political power and influence at home. This was made possible by the privileged position Edith How-Martyn and her British and American colleagues were in as white women travelling and working in the colonies, and the power dynamics involved.

Additionally, an imperial power dynamic was evident as Edith How-Martyn imagined India in orientalist and imperialist ways. For Western birth control advocates, India held a ‘special’ place in the international birth control movement.⁵⁵ The BCW group received many international visitors, but most often, international guests came from India. Even when the group was not receiving Indian guests, the records kept by Edith How-Martyn of the luncheon meetings of Birth Control Worldwide between 1936 and 1938 reveal that India was often the topic of conversation. Concerns about India extended beyond birth control to wider social issues: education and illiteracy in India were of particular concern to the group.⁵⁶ India was imagined as a site which Western women could improve. How-Martyn frequently made essentialist generalisations about India and Indian people, for instance during a visit to India in 1938, How-Martyn wrote to Olive Johnson saying that ‘interest [had] been great’, which was unsurprising because ‘Indian audiences are generally good listeners.’⁵⁷ In a public address at the second All India Population and Family Hygiene Conference in April 1938, How-Martyn stated that Indian women ‘are more self-effacing and less aggressive than in the west.’⁵⁸ At times, she expressed the view that India was backwards and uncivilised (discussed further in Chapter Two). How-Martyn described the situation for women in India as held back by ‘outworn customs, effete religious ideas and to

⁵⁴ Ahluwalia, *Reproductive Restraints*, p.60.

⁵⁵ Birth Control Worldwide Report October 1936 – September 1937, p.14, PP/EPR/F.2.

⁵⁶ BCW luncheons.

⁵⁷ EHM to Olive Johnson, 5 February 1938, PP/EPR/C.2.

⁵⁸ Edith How-Martyn, Speech at 2nd All India Population and Family Hygiene Conference, 17 April 1938, PP/EPR/C.2/5.

superstition and quackery of all kinds,' and saw birth control advocacy as a remedy to the 'darkness which now engulfs Indian mothers.'⁵⁹ How-Martyn's essentialist generalisations were informed by imperialist imaginings of India, and indeed the 'Orient' more broadly. This seems in stark contrast with other statements How-Martyn made regarding the nature of women:

...women are essentially the same everywhere, our skins may be a different colour, our tongues may use different languages but a bad maternity risk, a mother may be unfit to undertake a pregnancy whether she is in India, China, America or Europe needs medical advice on birth control in order to preserve her life.⁶⁰

Edith How-Martyn demonstrated ambivalence towards non-Western women, simultaneously expressing a universalist view of womanhood, and reiterating the innate difference between Western and non-Western women.

Similarly, Edith How-Martyn expressed conflicting views regarding the role of Indian women in the birth control movement. During the 1933 Birth Control in Asia Conference, How-Martyn had asserted the importance of any Western birth control advocates working closely with Indian women. When asked, she assured the conference, 'a fully qualified and trained nurse will be sent, but when she reaches India she will only work in connection with Indian women doctors.'⁶¹ Likewise, she expressed the hope that India would 'soon find her Margaret Sanger who will go throughout the length and breadth of India rousing the nation ... In her hands the torch of birth control will enlighten...'⁶² She also reported in 1938 of the important role of Lady Cowasjee Jehangir for the six birth control clinics in Bombay, stating, 'the value of her cooperation and leadership is immense.'⁶³ This demonstrates How-Martyn believed it was important for Indian women to be involved in Indian birth control campaigns, and valued their contributions, however, she represented herself and Margaret Sanger as the 'mothers' of the movement. Edith How-Martyn felt, 'the most valuable work I have done for birth

⁵⁹ EHM speech, April 1938.

⁶⁰ EHM speech, April 1938.

⁶¹ Michael Fielding (ed.), *Birth Control in Asia: A Report of a Conference held at the London School of Hygiene & Tropical Medicine, November 24-5 1933* (London: Birth Control International Information Centre, 1935), p.75.

⁶² EHM speech, April 1938.

⁶³ Edith How-Martyn, 'India, Third Birth Control Tour', 1937, p.2, PP/EPR/C.3/4.

control has been done in India.’⁶⁴ In addition, she noted that the significance of the 1938 conference in India outweighed that of the 1922 and 1933 conferences in London, and the 1927 and 1930 conferences in Switzerland, because, unlike in Europe and America, the conference in India was being held while the birth control movement was still ‘in its *infancy*’.⁶⁵ This choice of language evokes the notion of western women as the ‘mothers’ of the birth control movement.

Following characterisation of British imperialism as ‘paternalistic’, historians such as Barbara Ramusack have characterised the activism of British women in empire as ‘maternal imperialism’. Ramusack argued that British women activists were often referred to as mothers, or saw themselves as mothers to India and Indian people, and as such ‘embodied a benevolent maternal imperialism.’⁶⁶ As mother and daughter relationships have an unequal power dynamic, ‘the fact that the mother figures were British and the daughters were Indian heightened the aspects of inequality.’⁶⁷ Edith How-Martyn did not explicitly imagine herself as a mother figure, however elements of maternal imperialism were still present in her perceptions of empire. The weekly luncheon meetings of the Birth Control Worldwide group that took place between October 1936 and November 1938 were referred to by Edith How-Martyn and other attendees as ‘Lucina Lunches.’ Written on the first page of the Lucina Lunches record book Edith How-Martyn wrote, ‘Lucina, in Roman mythology the goddess of Light or rather the goddess who brings light presiding over the birth of children.’⁶⁸ The BCW group was likened by How-Martyn and its other members to having a maternal responsibility for the births of children around the world, and a maternal responsibility for the birth control movement itself. Thus, Edith How-Martyn placed herself and other Western birth control at the forefront of the birth control movement, with a maternal responsibility for their Indian and other non-Western ‘daughters’.

⁶⁴ EHM speech, April 1938.

⁶⁵ EHM speech, April 1938. (emphasis added)

⁶⁶ Barbara Ramusack, ‘Cultural missionaries, maternal imperialists, feminist allies: British women activists in India, 1865–1945’, *Women’s Studies International Forum* 13 (1990), p.133.

⁶⁷ Ramusack, ‘British women activists in India’, p.133.

⁶⁸ BCW luncheons, p.1.

Edith How-Martyn largely ignored any national(ist) concerns of her Indian counterparts. In her recent work on Indian suffragettes and the transnational networks within which they operated, Sumita Mukherjee notes that British and American women's expressions of internationalism were 'often alienating and not the appropriate terminology for the movement, actions, and identities of Indian women.'⁶⁹ Comparably, How-Martyn placed an internationalist agenda above national and nationalist concerns. In *Reproductive Restraints*, Ahluwalia argued that Western birth control advocates 'selectively built alliances within India to make sure they did not engage themselves with the political debates within and among various contending nationalist factions', and the evidence addressed here is concurrent with Ahluwalia's findings.⁷⁰ In all her interactions with India, both in London and in India itself, Edith How-Martyn did not engage with debates around the question of independence. In the records of Edith How-Martyn's birth control work in India, discussion of Indian independence is conspicuous only in its absence. Even when she met with Gandhi, reports do not show that any discussion of independence took place. The only record of How-Martyn engaging with in any discussion about Indian independence is from a BCW meeting in July 1937. A conversation between How-Martyn and Dr. Ketu from Haridwar in northern India, suggests How-Martyn believed 'no country can have real independence but all [should] have interdependence with full scope for national development.' How-Martyn also noted that Dr. Ketu, 'hopes Britain and India will remain connected.'⁷¹ This small insight into Edith How-Martyn's views on the subject demonstrates that 'internationalism' was placed above any national or nationalist concerns.

The failure to engage with the Indian nationalist movement demonstrates a lack of criticality regarding colonialism, and its role in perpetuating inequalities and poverty. Abstracting fertility control as a solution to social issues in non-Western countries meant that elite Western birth controllers removed issues surrounding maternal health, infant mortality and poverty from intersecting axes

⁶⁹ Sumita Mukherjee, *Indian Suffragettes: Female Identities and Transnational Networks* (Oxford University Press, 2018), p.10.

⁷⁰ Ahluwalia, *Reproductive Restraints*, p.62.

⁷¹ BCW luncheons, p.31.

of marginalisation, including marginalisation because of colonisation. Furthermore, their lack of involvement in independence discourse demonstrates a view of internationalism that centred a colonial, or at least, not an anti-colonial vision of international collaboration.

The birth control movement in the 1930s was certainly international, and in many ways, reflects trends of the internationalism of the interwar period that was taken on by women's organisations, both in ideology and methods. International travel served as a means for Western women to acquire cultural capital, authority and prestige, and their tours served as ways to spread the message of birth control and foster a certain kind of universal feminist sentiment, however, Edith How-Martyn placed British and Western narratives and experiences at the centre of the birth control movement, demonstrating an imperial power relationship. Appearing to be international was important to the organisational identity of both the BCIIC and the BCW group, therefore, Western birth control advocates performed internationalism through international tours, and other, more subtle ways. The feminist ideology of Edith How-Martyn was marked by imperial power relations, and as such can be characterised as 'maternal' feminism.

Chapter Two: Modernity, Progress and Civilization

In India your civilisation stands at the crossroads. You can now choose the way intelligently, and consciously apply knowledge and science and control birth rate, or allow the same errors of sentimentality to dominate your social and public health activities to the detriment of the quality of your future population.⁷²

Taken from Margaret Sanger's statement that was read at the First All-India Women's Conference in 1927, this quote encapsulates many important themes of the birth control movement in the interwar period. This chapter will explore how Western birth controllers employed imperial notions of civilisation, progress and modernity. Firstly, it will observe how birth control was 'rationalised' according to Western scientific ideals, and was represented as a 'modern' and 'intelligent' path, as opposed to 'traditional' and 'sentimental'. Then, the chapter will explore how these notions of progress and civilisation related to the eugenic ideology of the birth control movement, and finally, the chapter will examine how the modern technologies used by birth controllers reveal their own race- and class-based preconceptions and motivations.

Humans have sought to control their fertility throughout history. In the modern period, birth control movements sought to rationalise reproduction, turning to science for fertility control where previously, knowledge about fertility control was based on oral histories and 'traditional' methods.⁷³ Linda Gordon suggested that birth control advocates sought to solve what had previously been political and ethical questions through 'objective' study.⁷⁴ Western birth control advocates in the 1930s were 'products of the modernist project that sought to enhance control over life through rationalising reproduction with the adoption of new technologies.'⁷⁵ The rhetoric used by Edith How-Martyn and other Western birth controllers presented birth control as rational and scientific in opposition the 'sentimentality' of not using contraceptive methods. The contrast between

⁷² Margaret Sanger to the All-India Women's Conference, 1927, quoted in 'Account of an international tour', PP/EPR/C.2/7a, p.23.

⁷³ For example, Nicole Bourbonnais, 'Class, Colour and Contraception: The Politics of Birth Control in Jamaica, 1938-1967', *Social and Economic Studies* 61 (2012), p.9.

⁷⁴ Gordon, *Woman's Body, Woman's Right*, p.253.

⁷⁵ Ahluwalia, *Reproductive Restraints*, p.75.

tradition and modernity, tradition and rationality, is evident in much of the material produced by the BCIIC and written by Edith How-Martyn herself. When visiting Hawaii as part of the Round the World for Birth Control Tour in 1935, Edith How-Martyn wrote, 'if an emotional attitude [should] be roused, conduct tends to fall back to traditional rather than remain rational.'⁷⁶ Here, traditional was juxtaposed to rational. Furthermore, How-Martyn described going falling *back* to traditional conduct, insinuating that 'tradition' was regressive. Western birth control advocates were modern in opposition to 'traditional', non-Western cultures.

Also present in this discourse was the notion of 'intelligence' which was attached to a position sympathetic to birth control. Margaret Sanger's statement to the All India Women's Conference demonstrates 'intelligence' was a label applied to those who made the choice to adopt birth control methods. Sanger described the decision to adopt birth control as 'intelligently' choosing to 'consciously apply knowledge and science', while the decision to leave the population unchecked by birth control would mean allowing 'errors of sentimentality' to determine social and public health. The BCIIC reported during the Round the World for Birth Control Tour, in India and Japan, 'those *qualified* to understand the situation recognise the need for population control'.⁷⁷ By implying opposition to birth control as coming from 'uneducated' traditionalists, Western advocates could situate themselves as the only legitimate authority on the topic. Non-Western birth control advocates also used this kind language. During her address at the second All-India Population and first Family Hygiene conference in 1938, Lady Cowasjee Jehangir expressed the hope that a greater understanding of 'family limitation' would 'give rise to a saner and more logical understanding of a health problem.'⁷⁸ Birth control advocates aligned their message with Western-centric notions of rationality and science, consequently associating intelligence, rationality and modernity with the West, and sentimentality, tradition and backwardness with the non-West. This process also

⁷⁶ EHM Hawaii Journal, PP/EPR/C.4, p.19.

⁷⁷ 'Account of an international tour', p.45 (emphasis added).

⁷⁸ 'The 2nd All-India and First Family Hygiene Conference', PP/EPR/C.2/5.

led to 'traditional' birth control methods, for instance rhythm methods, withdrawal, herbal remedies to induce miscarriage, being delegitimised, and replaced with more technologically advanced forms of birth control, such as diaphragms, pessaries, and spermicides, creating new markets for Western birth control advocates to sell their products.

Key to legitimising birth control as modern, scientific and rational, was its medicalisation. The rhetoric of the BCIIC compared the development of reliable birth control to other medical discoveries, for example the use of anaesthesia.⁷⁹ BCIIC reports emphasised contact with medical professionals and the influence of their tours on the medical profession. The January 1936 tour of India reportedly 'put contact with physicians first in all its activities' and as a result, 'the active interest and support of the medical profession was the most significant single fact.'⁸⁰ For Western birth control advocates, the medical profession was central to their proselytizing efforts, demonstrating a 'top-down' approach to the spread of birth control.

Furthermore, birth control was conceptualised by Western birth control advocates as a preventative medicine: birth control was thought of as the most effective way of solving the problems of infant and maternal mortality. Regarding Burma, it was hoped, 'with more education both physicians and the general public will see that birth control is one of the most effective ways of solving these problems.'⁸¹ Similarly, How-Martyn hoped the birth control movement in Bombay would, 'proceed along the lines of preventive health work and that doctors will give more attention to the value of contraception in their struggle against the high rates of infant and maternal mortality.'⁸² Ahluwalia argued that middle class Western advocates did not question the social structures of class and race differences at home or abroad.⁸³ The way Edith How-Martyn and the BCIIC argued for scientific and technological solutions to poverty, poor maternal and infant welfare through birth control, demonstrates a lack consideration for racial,

⁷⁹ Julian Huxley, Introduction, *Round the World for Birth Control with Margaret Sanger and Edith How-Martyn*, p.3.

⁸⁰ 'Account of an international tour', pp.25-6, p.37.

⁸¹ 'Account of an international tour', p.30.

⁸² Edith How-Martyn, 'Contraception in the Orient', PP/EPR/H/1/35.

⁸³ Ahluwalia, *Reproductive Restraints*, pp.61-62

class and caste inequalities, and indeed oppression due to colonisation, as causes of poverty, poor maternal health and high infant mortality.

In addition to encouraging progress through improving maternal and infant health, Western birth control advocates argued birth control was ‘an essential factor in raising the standard of living.’⁸⁴ A pamphlet by Edith How-Martyn as part of a series, ‘Ten Good Reasons for Birth Control’, gave reason nine: ‘the Preservation of Civilisation’. Civilisation, How-Martyn suggested in her pamphlet was ‘reflected in a high standard of living.’⁸⁵ Although birth controllers may appear to have had a humanitarian concern for those living in poverty, the desire to raise standards of living through birth control was in fact a clear expression of eugenic ideology.⁸⁶ Birth control advocates were sought to create the ideal conditions in which to raise the best ‘quality’ children. The Jamaican Women’s Conference in 1939 illuminated the fact that there were cases of girls as young as twelve dying in childbirth. Edith How-Martyn called on her audience to ‘listen with your heart and mind ... and you will hear the voice of these young girls who have died at 12 and 15 years of age in childbirth,’ however, one of the primary concerns of such young children getting pregnant was the quality of the offspring this would produce.⁸⁷ May Farquharson, a speaker at the conference, noted ‘these children were not physically and psychologically fit to have children. It would therefore mean a depreciation in the condition of their people.’⁸⁸ Edith How-Martyn told the Conference, ‘[birth control] means better babies, a higher standard of life and more happiness to the family.’⁸⁹ Edith How-Martyn’s tour to Jamaica reveals a birth control ideology that was based on the eugenic principle of producing high quality children.

⁸⁴ ‘Account of an international tour’, p.34.

⁸⁵ Edith How-Martyn, ‘Ten Good Reasons for Birth Control’ PP/EPR/A2.

⁸⁶ Eugenic ideology of birth controllers has been demonstrated. In *New Woman and the New Race*, Sanger described birth control as ‘nothing more or less than the facilitation of the process of weeding out the unfit, of preventing the birth of defectives or of those who will become defectives.’ See for example: Dennis Hodgson and Susan Cott Watkins, ‘Feminists and Neo-Malthusians: Past and Present Alliances’, *Population and Development Review* 23 (1997); Carey, ‘Racial Imperatives of Sex’.

⁸⁷ ‘Women Deal with Big Problems’, *Daily Gleaner*, 28 February 1939.

⁸⁸ ‘Women Deal with Big Problems’.

⁸⁹ ‘Women Deal with Big Problems’.

Eugenic concerns to produce ‘quality’ children extended to a dysgenic approach towards lower classes. In a letter to C.P. Blacker, president of the eugenics society, Margaret Sanger set out the aims of the BCIIC:

...first, to bring to the poorer and biologically worse-endowed stocks the knowledge of birth control that is already prevalent among those who are both genetically and economically better favoured: and secondly, to bring the birth rates of the East more in line with those of England and the civilizations of the West.⁹⁰

According to literature produced by the BCIIC, the problem faced in India was ‘how to direct the practical application of birth control in *the classes where it is most urgently needed*.’⁹¹ In China, the immediate concern was to ‘eliminate the birth of undesirable citizens of tomorrow’.⁹² Similarly, in Japan, public health problems including a high infant death rate, a large numbers of people suffering from trachoma and leprosy, pointed to the need for birth control on a ‘scientific basis’.⁹³ The report does not fully explain the connection between trachoma (an infectious disease of the eye), leprosy and birth control, only that birth control would be a ‘method of checking the *excess* population’.⁹⁴ As such, one of the aims of international birth control was to ‘check’ undesirable populations.

It should be noted that eugenics was not a Western ideology. Since the conception of the Malthusian League in 1877, it had members and correspondence in India. In 1885, among the League’s vice-presidents were Mr. P. Murugesha Mudaliar, editor of the *Philosophic Inquirer* of Madras.⁹⁵ Ahluwalia noted the ideological alliance of neo-Malthusianism and eugenics within the Indian birth control movement, pointing towards Gopaljee Ahluwalia’s 1923 essay, ‘Indian Population Problem: Selective Lower Birth Rate, a Sure Remedy of Extreme Indian Poverty’, and A.P. Pillay’s 1931 article published in the *Birth Control Review*, ‘Eugenical Birth Control for India’.⁹⁶ Likewise, Barbara Ramusack noted that Indian advocates of reproductive control ‘appropriated Neo-Malthusian and eugenic arguments but shaped them to their own visions of a strong Indian

⁹⁰ Margaret Sanger to C.P. Blacker, 14 November 1935, SA/EUG/D/12/14.

⁹¹ ‘Account of an international tour’, p.12 (emphasis added).

⁹² ‘Account of an international tour’, p.35.

⁹³ ‘Account of an international tour’, p.46.

⁹⁴ ‘Account of an international tour’, p.46 (emphasis added).

⁹⁵ Edith How-Martyn, ‘A Brief Survey of the Birth Control Movement in India’, PP/EPR/C.2/5

⁹⁶ Ahluwalia, *Reproductive Restraints*, pp.30-1.

nation.⁹⁷ Eugenics was a shared philosophy across national boundaries, but was a distinctly upper- and middle-class ideology. Although shared between Western and non-Western birth controllers, the eugenic ideology of Edith How-Martyn and Western birth control advocates was used as part of an imperialist ideology regarding what it meant to be ‘civilised’, and what it meant to embody ‘progress’.

Another way in which Edith How-Martyn believed she could bring progress and civilisation to non-Western countries was through improving the position of women. In a 1938 speech in India, Edith-How-Martyn declared, ‘Women are claiming the right to decide when and how often they will become mothers and with the advance of civilisation that right must be granted’.⁹⁸ How-Martyn directly associated the position of women as a marker of a society’s level of civilisation.

The trope of citing the position of women in a society as justification for the invasion, conquest, or rule of another country, is a common one, in historical and contemporary narratives. The position of women was often used by British imperialists to justify colonial rule. In India, the practice of widow burning (*suttee*) was used as evidence of the backwardness of Indian society, and ‘became an alibi for the colonial civilising mission.’⁹⁹ There are stark examples that explicitly outline the birth control movement of the 1930s as a continuation of this logic: at the 1933 Birth Control in Asia Conference held in London, Professor Gupta, who was from India, stated ‘the prevention of unlimited births is just as important in India to-day as probably was the prevention of *suttee* many years ago.’¹⁰⁰

Edith How-Martyn’s goal of civilising and improving the position of women in society resembles Western missionaries who sought to civilise by converting colonised peoples to Christianity, and British women activists who aimed to improve the position of women in the colonies through education. According to Barbara Ramusack, British women activists in India ‘functioned as secular

⁹⁷ Barbara Ramusack, ‘Embattled Advocates: The Debate over Birth Control in India, 1920-40’, *Journal of Women’s History* 1 (1989), p.56.

⁹⁸ EHM speech, April 1938.

⁹⁹ Lata Mani, *Contentious Traditions: The Debate on Sati in Colonial India* (University of California Press, 1998), p.2.

¹⁰⁰ Fielding, *Birth Control in Asia*, p.73.

missionaries'.¹⁰¹ Edith How-Martyn was no exception. Contemporary observers used language with religious connotations when referring to the international work of the birth control movement. Lord Horder, who acted as chairman for the first session of the Birth Control in Asia Conference, explicitly described the BCIIC's work to missionary activity:

The object of the International Information Centre is – using the word in its widest and best sense – missionary; that is to say, it aims at making known as widely as possible, and therefore in as many countries and languages as possible, the gospel of birth-control.¹⁰²

Although Edith How-Martyn herself tried to disassociate her birth control work from religious missionary work, which she described as being 'futile as it fails to tackle the fundamental problem of numbers in relation to health and economic resources', How-Martyn often framed the birth control movement in quasi-religious ways.¹⁰³ In a speech delivered at a public meeting at the 2nd All India Population and Family Hygiene Conference in April 1938, Martyn described the birth control movement as a 'crusade for humanity'.¹⁰⁴ Similarly literature produced by the BCIIC in 1937, referred to the 'gospel' of birth control.¹⁰⁵ This demonstrates the proselytizing way Edith How-Martyn approached her birth control advocacy. As such, Edith How-Martyn and her colleagues can be described as secular missionaries, and demonstrate a relationship to non-Western countries defined by an imperial context.

In the case of Western birth control advocates in the 1930s, international travel to areas of the British empire and other non-Western countries, claimed to improve the position of women through allowing them to space having children and to limit the number of children they would have. Western birth control advocates were concerned with improving maternal health and the welfare of mothers, but there is little evidence that birth controllers demanded the bodily rights of women. In her essay, 'Contraception in the Orient', How-Martyn recalled a surprising occasion during her trip to Shanghai which had taken place in 1936:

¹⁰¹ Ramusack, 'British women activists in India', p.132.

¹⁰² Fielding, *Birth Control in Asia*, p.11.

¹⁰³ EHM, 'Contraception in the Orient'.

¹⁰⁴ EHM speech, April 1938.

¹⁰⁵ 'Account of an international tour', p.3

I was invited to speak on the opening of the clinic and was surprised to find an audience of fathers instead of mothers! However I was asked to give a talk on methods as the fathers wanted to know exactly what the clinic proposed to recommend and if they approved the wives would be sent for fitting.¹⁰⁶

How-Martyn expressed no qualms over men deciding the reproductive fate of their wives. Her goal was to spread birth control and family limitation ideology, not necessarily to provide women with choice and control over their individual reproductive health.

Although Edith How-Martyn claimed her aim was to provide women with control over their fertility, she was satisfied with women's fertility being controlled by their husbands. Similarly, Western birth control advocates controlled which kinds of women should have control over their fertility by making judgements regarding the types of birth control women could access. To remedy concerns that black people in America were too ignorant to use contraceptive devices such as diaphragms, Lydia Allen DiVibless, an 'ardent eugenicist', and director of the Mothers' Health Maternity Clinic in Miami, Florida, investigated simpler and cheaper means of contraception, including the foam powder and sponge method which was developed in 1935, in time for Margaret Sanger and Edith How-Martyn to take samples on their 1935-36 tour of India.¹⁰⁷ In her essay 'Contraception in the Orient', How-Martyn explained that in Hong Kong, 'a doctor at one of the Maternal Welfare Centres is using the Foam Powder for her very poor patients'.¹⁰⁸ This demonstrates that new technologies were developed based on racialized ideas, and that new technologies were tested on poorer patients. Birth controllers were therefore less concerned with providing safe methods of contraception to lower class, poor people.

In other instances, poorer, or lower class people were perceived as too 'ignorant' to use new technologies effectively, resulting in advocates encouraging such people to use more appropriately 'primitive' contraceptive methods. In 1936, the *Journal of Contraception* reported,

¹⁰⁶ EHM, 'Contraception in the Orient'.

¹⁰⁷ 'Foam Powder and Sponge: The Quest for Doctorless Birth Control', *Margaret Sanger Papers Project* 15 (1997).

¹⁰⁸ EHM 'contraception in the orient'.

With regard to the methods employed, the diaphragm pessary with a contraceptive jelly was the most widely prescribed and was found to give the most satisfactory results. For the poor and the ignorant the vinegar or olive oil plug was considered to be the most adequate.¹⁰⁹

Poor and 'ignorant' couples were not given access to the more technologically advanced, and more effective methods, leaving them to use methods more suited to their own 'level of civilisation'. While gender and colonialism has often been explored under the rubric of race, Western advocates' notions of modernity highlight class-based, as well as racialized, assumptions about non-Western women.¹¹⁰

Edith How-Martyn's international work with the birth control movement was informed by imperialist and eugenic ideas about progress, civilization and modernity. Western birth control advocates saw population control through contraceptive use as means to become a modern, 'civilised' society. By medicalizing birth control, western birth control advocates were able rationalize birth control as a means to solve health and social problems. Western birth control advocates and their elite non-Western counterparts ignored structural socio-political roots of poverty, low living standards, and poor maternal and infant health, rather focusing on their 'one-point agenda': the dissemination of birth control technology and information.¹¹¹

¹⁰⁹ 'Birth Control in India', *Journal of Contraception* 1 (1936), PP/EPR/H/1/17.

¹¹⁰ Meera Kosambi and Jane Haggis, 'Editorial', *Feminist Review* 65 (2000), p.1.

¹¹¹ Ahluwalia, *Reproductive Restraints*, p.63.

Conclusion

This dissertation has shown how imperialism informed the ideology, rhetoric and actions of the birth control movement. Edith How-Martyn and her colleagues at the BCIIC and BCW placed themselves, white British women, at the forefront of the international birth control movement. The internationalist agenda embodied by the birth control movement, reflected internationalist ideology and methods of international women's organisations of the interwar period. Although they worked collaboratively with certain higher class non-Western women, British women acted as maternal feminists, positioned above their non-Western 'daughters', and as secular missionaries, who saw their role as bringing progress and civilisation to the world in the form of birth control. The way that Edith How-Martyn and her colleagues imagined their movement as international, and as bringing civilisation and modernity to non-Western countries, reflects a wider imperialist ideology that saw the West as the pinnacle of progress and modernity.

The prestige and cultural capital Edith How-Martyn accumulated through her international travel is testament to the imperial power dynamics that informed her interactions with non-Western countries and people. For Edith How-Martyn and other women involved in the birth control movement, international travel afforded the opportunity to gain influence and authority, both as white, Western, *modern* women abroad, and as experienced, politically engaged women at home.

The archival material of the Eileen Palmer collections is rich, and there is so much still to be uncovered. Although this work has addressed a wider range of examples of How-Martyn's international birth control work than any previous studies, her tours in Europe, the Middle East and North America are yet to be explored. In December 1933 and January 1934, How-Martyn travelled to Egypt, Palestine and Syria, and it would be interesting to find out whether the themes nature of internationalism, and ideas of progress and civilisation were also present in this tour. How-Martyn's tour of the Soviet Union also requires further study. It would also be valuable to investigate the discourse surrounding over-population and the demographic anxieties that informed ideas about birth control, and how these were articulated as global problems.

This dissertation has taken the work of an individual as a case study, so further research should be undertaken to contextualise Edith How-Martyn's birth control work within the wider British birth control movement. The BCIIC and BCW were explicitly focused on international work, so it would be interesting to find out whether other groups were influenced by internationalism, and imperialism, in the same way.

Much work on the history of the birth control movement focuses on elite, or at least middle-class advocates. Clare Debenham's article located working-class activist women at the heart of provincial birth control movements, but there remains extensive scope for research into the role of working class, and indeed regional, birth control movements and advocates.¹¹²

¹¹² Clare Debenham, 'Mrs Elsie Plant—suffragette, socialist and birth control activist', *Women's History Review* 19 (2010).

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