With Smiles and With Soap
The British Empire as a concealed state of mind.

IMPERIAL LEATHER
Race, Gender and Sexuality
in the Colonial Context.

By Anne McClintock

By Lewis D. Wurbaft

NOT so long ago, most historical accounts of British colonialism fell in line with the 19th-century historian John Seeley's max-

im that the English had "conquered and peopled half the world in a fit of absence of mind." The Empire, that is, was founded and then func-
tioned in relative neglect, remote from the calculations and concerns animating Victorian life. Anne McClintock's "Imperial Leather" takes a promi-
nent place among a number of recent works, in-
cluding Edward W. Said's "Culture and Imperial-
ism," that question the elevation of the colonial enterprise to the back benches of the Victorian sensibility. "Imperialism," Ms. McClintock con-
tends, was a new concept, that had not, everywhere — a disagreeable fact of history external to Western identity. Rather, the imperial enterprise and its implications were repression, the "conquest" of the "Other," that was not the original intent. In her reckoning, colonized peoples embodied the dark and contradictory underside of Victorianism that when not hidden away was visible only through an exotic iconography of degeneracy and debasement.

"Imperial Leather" places the raci's politics of imperialism at the imaginative center of Victorian life. A complex, fluctuating set of cultural images both contained the society's economic and sexual contradictions and was used to justify patriarchal domination. Ms. McClintock says. This was man-
aged, she argues, through the agency of the fetish, a concept that she teases out of its familiar contexts in primitive religion, Marxism and psychoanalysis and applies to the dynamics of gender and race. "Fetishes," she says, "involve the displacement of a host of social contradictions onto individual objects"; given that broad definition, Ms. McClintock, a professor of English at Columbia University, can use the term to present imperial rituals as means of mastering the cultural and sexual ambiguities of Victorian society at home and abroad. And so, she argues, in Victorian Britain, the economy and sexuality "were arranged around the social idea of racial fetishism, displacing what the modern imagination could not incorporate onto the invented domain of the primitive."

But she goes farther: "Imperialism," she says, "returned to haunt the enterprise of modernity as its concealed but central logic." Not surprisingly, "Imperial Leather" falls short of substantiating this far-reaching contention. Described as "an at-
tempt to intervene strategically in historical narra-
tives of race and fetishism, domesticity and em-
pire," it nevertheless lacks any broad discussion of economic or social history. Still, Ms. McClintock's astute reading of novels, diaries and advertise-
ments, among other sources, demonstrates how images of domestic life can be incorporated into an ideology of imperial domination. This is most graphically shown in her treatment of late-19th-century advertise-
ing, in which mass-produced commodities were sold under the banner of imperial expansion as icons of progress and power.

Lewis D. Wurbaft, a clinical psychologist, is the author of "The Imperial Imagination: Magic and Myth in Kipling's India."

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