



BOOK REVIEW

## Lacey Sparks. *Women and the Rise of Nutrition Science in Interwar Britain and British Africa*

**Britain and the World. Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2023. Pp. 206.  
\$119.00 (cloth).**

Jonathan Robins 

Michigan Technological University  
Email: [jrobins@mtu.edu](mailto:jrobins@mtu.edu)

In this book, Lacey Sparks demonstrates the key role played by women in designing and implementing colonial nutritional and educational policies during the interwar period. Building on scholarship by Michael Worboys and others on the so-called discovery of malnutrition in the interwar period, Sparks traces the interconnected emergence of nutritional science and policies informed by it in Britain and its overseas empire. Much of the book centers on the Committee for Nutrition in the Colonial Empire (CNCE) and on the preceding reports, correspondence, and memoranda that led up to the CNCE's creation in 1935. While the CNCE's papers have been selectively used by historians, Sparks examines a wide range of materials and effectively connects the committee's work to other parts of Britain's imperial bureaucracy, particularly the Advisory Committee for Education in the Colonies (founded 1924) and its subcommittee focused on African women and girls (founded 1939).

Across the book's six core chapters, Sparks emphasizes how British women's testimonies and reports shaped colonial approaches to nutrition, explaining in part why domestic science featured so prominently as a tool for ameliorating malnutrition. The story is largely told from the perspective of the British Colonial Office, with secondary sources providing additional insights on individual experiences and reactions to colonial programs in Nigeria. Sparks treats Britain and Nigeria in the same frame in each chapter, avoiding a case study approach that arbitrarily separates colony from metropole when so many people, ideas, and practices flowed between them. Sparks explains the decision to focus on Nigeria by pointing to the extensive network of missionary educational institutes that taught domestic science, though a broader look at British West Africa or beyond would have been useful.

Women, Sparks argued, endured the effects of nutrition policies (or lack thereof) while also serving as the primary instruments and objects of it. British women designed and implemented educational programs in domestic science, and Nigerian women—who prepared most food in the colonial era—had to balance local tastes and economic realities with the demands of educators and administrators armed with nutritional facts and scientific curricula. The book highlights women like Philippa Esdaile and Mary Blacklock, rather than dwelling on well-known men in the history of nutrition like John Boyd Orr.

A comparison of curricula at two institutions, Berridge House in London (established 1909) and Queen's College in Lagos (established 1927), anchors chapter 5 and provides examples of differing priorities in metropole and colony in later chapters. In Nigeria, Sparks shows, demonstration was often the extent of domestic science education, reflecting British assumptions about the needs, interests, and capabilities of Nigerian students. In contrast, British students received lectures on nutrition science and domestic science theory, with demonstrations

servicing primarily as illustrations. Queen's College superintendent Gladys Plummer features prominently in the book, although Sylvia Leith-Ross—who helped found the school and wrote extensively about food and gender in Nigeria—appears only through secondary sources.

The book profiles key figures in British colonial policy surrounding nutrition, and brings a clearly gendered analysis to nutrition, a topic which Sparks rightly argues cannot be addressed without taking gender into account. At times Sparks overstates the impact of colonial policies on food availability in colonial West Africa; here engagement with work on cash crop production and food in the region like Michael J. Watts's classic *Silent Violence: Food, Famine, and Peasantry in Northern Nigeria* (1983) and more recent work by others on cotton, cocoa, groundnuts, and other cash crops might have produced a more rounded picture of the tradeoffs between exports and domestic food production.

The book's emphasis on nutrition rather than malnutrition is a strength as the two are not the same thing. Yet there is a great deal of new literature on malnutrition in Britain's African colonies, including Jennifer Tappan's *The Riddle of Malnutrition: The Long Arc of Biomedical and Public Health Interventions in Uganda* (2017) and a number of recent articles by Bryson Nkhoma, John Nott, and others. These studies have shown how scientific understandings of nutrition and malnutrition evolved, how colonial governments defined and addressed nutritional problems, and how Africans in different contexts responded to colonial policies aimed at how they cooked, ate, and nurtured children. Along with new work on malnutrition in French, Portuguese, and Belgian colonial contexts, this literature might have strengthened the conclusion of Sparks's book, which makes important claims about the ways Nigerian women used literacy, education, and "pedagogical ambiguity" to reshape colonial programs (188). I look forward to additional work that looks past 1945 or beyond Britain and Nigeria to continue exploring the gendered history for nutrition.