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Rebecca Rogers, *A Frenchwoman's Imperial Story: Madame Luce in Nineteenth-Century Algeria*. Stanford, Cal.: Stanford University Press, 2013. xviii + 267 pp. Maps, figures, notes, bibliography, and index. \$65.00 U.S. (cl). ISBN 978-0-8047-8431-3.

Review by Margaret Cook Andersen, University of Tennessee.

“Some people’s lives add only color to the past; others make us read the past differently” (p. 1). Rebecca Rogers argues that the life of schoolteacher Mme. Eugénie Luce is an example of the latter. By painstakingly reconstructing this life, Rogers transforms our understanding of the politics of the civilizing mission in early colonial Algeria. During the 1840s, Luce convinced colonial authorities to subsidize a school for indigenous girls. In so doing, the French could teach girls to read and write, provide them with a vocational skill, and introduce concepts of morality, hygiene, and discipline. She hoped that this would bring about a “fusion of the races” (p. 65), bridging the gap between the Arab and French populations, and winning the hearts and minds of the colonized. As the first person to promote the education of indigenous girls in Algeria and ultimately one of the only people to direct such a school in the nineteenth century, Luce was clearly at the center of these early debates about the role of girls’ education in the civilizing mission.

Rogers contributes to a growing body of literature that calls into question the notion that imperialism was a largely masculine enterprise. In fact, Rogers builds on a number of studies that have included Mme. Luce and her school in their analyses of the history of women and empire.<sup>[1]</sup> Yet, Rogers’s book is the first to explore the life of this woman in greater detail, situating her initiatives in the larger histories of international feminism, material culture, and feminine education in both France and empire, and the politics of early colonial Algeria. Rogers is interested in more than simply writing women into the history of empire, otherwise described as “add women and stir” (p. 11). Instead, her goal is to place Luce at the center of the developing ideology of the civilizing mission which, as we see in this book, fluctuated and changed over the course of Luce’s life. The way Luce promoted indigenous girls’ education, and the influence that she had in this arena, enlarges our understanding of how ideas of gender factored into the ideology of the civilizing mission.

One of the challenges that Rogers faced in researching this book is that Luce did not leave memoirs, something that requires considerable detective work from the researcher interested in reconstructing her life and understanding her motives fully. Archival documents record many of the milestones of her life and also detail how she lobbied for her school in Algiers. Most of the insights into her childhood, character, and life choices come from stories passed down to her great granddaughter, contemporary articles about her initiatives, and letters written to acquaintances. The nature of the sources naturally presents certain challenges as the information they contain is colored by the passage of time, Luce’s choices about how to present her past to others, and the interests and personalities of those writing about her life. To give readers a sense of the process involved, Rogers begins and ends her book with excerpts from the diary that she kept while researching this book in Algeria, France, and the United Kingdom.

We learn that Luce was born in 1804, the sixth of seven children. It was the family's financial situation and her parents' determination to see her settled that led to her doomed marriage to Alexandre Allix. Though apparently incompatible, the young couple soon had two children, one of whom died as an infant. The sources offer some clues about what ultimately led Luce to abandon her family and go to Algeria in 1832. Rogers explains that Luce was unhappily married and a residential and financial separation would have been an unappealing option. In addition to her desire to escape her husband fully, Luce may also have been influenced by radical Saint-Simonian ideas about gender equality. While there are no sources indicating what Luce thought about this ideology at the time, Rogers does tell us that Luce became acquainted with Prosper Enfantin (the leader of this movement) while he was in Algeria. She reproduces a letter that Luce later wrote to Enfantin telling him that she had long admired his ideas. One interesting implication of this correspondence is that it shows the involvement of women in the cultural politics of the early colony which, at this time, was home to a number of Saint-Simonian followers. Unfortunately, due to gaps in the sources, this part of the argument does not get much attention in the study.

Luce's decision to flee her marriage and go to Algeria was very unusual for the time. When she arrived in 1832, France's conquest of the colony was still very much ongoing, having been initiated only two years earlier. Other than those serving in the military, there were relatively few French men in the colony and even fewer French women. These early years were most likely a struggle for Luce as she made her way washing laundry for the military and teaching lessons. Archival records indicate that she soon had an illegitimate child who died in infancy. Later on, she entered into a long-term relationship with military musician Louis Luce and began to lobby for the establishment of a school for Arab girls in the colony. She and her new partner had a son, her fourth child, who would also die in early childhood.

The death of husband Alexandre Allix in 1845 was an important turning point in this saga. His passing brought Luce back to France to claim her inheritance and reunite with her daughter. The money from the inheritance enabled mother and daughter to go to Algeria and establish the school Luce had long dreamed of directing. Her husband's death also freed Luce to marry her longtime partner and become more respectable. As Rogers tells us, Luce's situation was not particularly unusual in Algeria where rates of illegitimacy and cohabitation exceeded those of France. Because these types of family arrangements were common in a new colony where Europeans moved around a lot, women like Luce were more tolerated than would have been the case in France. Still, as time went on, and the colony developed more of a permanent settler population, its society became more hostile to these types of practices. This was especially problematic for a schoolteacher who, as was the case in France, was expected to be a model of moral rectitude. In her negotiations with the administration, Luce's personal affairs and reputation repeatedly came up when officials questioned the value of her school and the moral influence she had on her pupils.

Despite speculation about her morality, Luce successfully built support for her school, winning approval from some local Arab families, Catholic leaders, and even the Queen of France. She also secured government funds by writing letters to the administration and placing girls' education at the center of the civilizing mission in her appeal for support. In 1846, for instance, she argued that investing in girls' education would be a more peaceful, and less costly, way of pacifying the population than the ongoing military campaigns. The colonial administration soon agreed to support her work, seeing in them something that would contribute to their own efforts to civilize the colonial subjects and foster greater understanding and cooperation between the two populations.

Most students at the school were Arab and generally from poor families who depended on the modest sum given to them to support their commitment to their daughters' education. Still, there were some Jewish girls and a few Europeans enrolled in the school, including Luce's own granddaughter. In addition to learning to read and write in French and Arabic, girls studied subjects like math and geography. There was a strong emphasis on vocational skills, especially sewing and embroidery. Rogers

points out that aside from the Arabic lessons and the ideas of racial hierarchy embedded in the lessons, this educational program in many ways resembled what existed in France at the time. For instance Luce emphasized discipline, punctuality, cleanliness, health, and hygiene. Having already published extensively on nineteenth-century girls' education in France, Rogers is also able to identify some innovations in Luce's pedagogy. One example is that Luce strove to teach her students the value of money and thriftiness by encouraging them to sell their embroideries and deposit their earnings in individual savings accounts she established on their behalf. According to Rogers, it was not until the 1870s that this type of practice was adopted in schools in France.

Perhaps the strongest part of this study is the case that Rogers makes for Luce's influence on French ideas about the civilizing mission and their country's role in Algeria at this time. Not only is this evident in her successful negotiations with the local administration, it can also be seen in the amount of publicity her school and pupils attracted. Her school had many visitors, including photographer Félix Moulin who produced a famous photographic record of Algeria during this period. In his book, he included three photos of her school, the only real glimpse we get of the students and his only pictures of indigenous women that did not "exaggerate their otherness" (p. 111). Moreover, the embroideries produced by some of the pupils were proudly displayed at France's Universal Exhibition of 1855 and other venues. The writer Alexandre Dumas visited in 1864 and soon became a family friend. Finally, the school became a destination for many curious foreign travelers in Algeria, especially British women. Luce's interaction with British feminists brought her some fame as some of the women wrote articles about her in guidebooks, journals, and books. Rogers notes that while Luce became something of a hero in British feminist circles, she remained less well-known among French feminists.

This section of the book makes clear that Luce's school became an important symbol of what the French could accomplish in Algeria. Yet the fact that the school's achievements and potential were understood in a variety of ways tells us that there was never a single, unitary conception of the civilizing mission. For instance, we see that colonial administrators liked to showcase the students' needlework as evidence that the French were developing the local economy and reviving authentic North African artisanal work. Protestant missionaries wrote that this initiative would deter young women from prostitution by giving them vocational skills and instilling in them ideals of decency and morality. British feminists expressed hopes that the school would empower young women, liberating them from what they believed to be the oppressive prejudices of their culture. The fact that the school attracted more of a response from British feminists than their French counterparts speaks to the international character of imperial feminism during this period.

Although Luce's school received support from the local government during its early years, there were always concerns that teaching indigenous girls to read and write harmed their marriage prospects with men of their own class. Some critics asserted that the girls' exposure to European ideas would corrupt them, ultimately preparing them to be nothing more than concubines for local Europeans. Eventually these arguments prevailed, prompting local officials in 1861 to pass a decree turning Luce's school into a vocational workshop. Rogers notes that this view developed at a time when settlers were beginning to outnumber other groups in Algiers, racial and gender hierarchies were becoming more rigid, and settler opinion was increasingly hostile to earlier concepts of racial fusion espoused by people like Luce. Whereas in 1846 Luce had convinced officials that educating indigenous women was central to the civilizing mission, by 1861 opinion had shifted and women were no longer a part of these goals. Rogers argues that these changes reflect the ambivalence of French policy during these first decades of colonial Algeria.

In the 1870s, Mme Luce returned to France with her great granddaughter, leaving the workshop in her granddaughter's hands. Though the purpose of the workshop had changed, being now focused exclusively on teaching girls embroidery and reviving traditional North African needlework, it continued to be a tourist destination attracting such noteworthy visitors as Isabelle Eberhardt and the

Queen of Portugal. The artwork produced by the girls continued to be exhibited in faraway places, demonstrating the “positive” effects of French colonization. Though the school’s mission had changed, it continued to be an important part of the image of French Algeria that local officials wished to project.

Ultimately studying Luce’s life and the school she established in Algiers changes our understanding of early colonial Algeria in a number of ways. Luce was clearly an unusual woman in that she lived in the Casbah among indigenous Algerians, spoke Arabic, and taught many indigenous girls. Her example, similar to that of Isabelle Eberhardt decades later, nevertheless challenges the traditional view that the arrival of European women in the colonies increased racial separation. In this study, we see that Luce’s school existed for a very different reason, that of bringing the populations together. Luce’s vision for her school is also worth close consideration because of how it deviates from much of what has been written about the French civilizing mission and indigenous women. As Rogers rightly argues, French images of Muslim women tended to focus on the familiar tropes: veiled sequestered women, child marriage, polygamy, et cetera. Even among visiting French feminists such as Hubertine Auclert, these same images predominate. Rogers notes that, not surprisingly, historians writing about gender and empire in North Africa have likewise focused on these same themes. Yet, in this study we get a different image of colonial Algeria, one in which young indigenous women attended school and, at Luce’s insistence, did so unveiled. Rogers concludes that the interaction between indigenous and European women in the material culture of the period is something that deserves additional study.

Ultimately the biography of Mme Luce does more than simply “add color to the past.” By detailing how one woman and her goals of educating indigenous girls factored into larger ideas about France’s civilizing mission, Rogers has shed new light on the significance of gender in the making of early colonial Algeria.

## NOTES

[1] Yvonne Knibiehler and Régine Goutalier, *La femme au temps des colonies* (Paris: Stock, 1985); Marnia Lazreg, *The Eloquence of Silence: Algerian Women in Question* (New York: Routledge, 1994); Dalila Morsly, “La classe de Madame Allix-Luce. Quand des ‘jeunes filles musulmanes’ apprenaient le français (Alger 1846-1861),” in D. Morsly, ed., *L’enseignement du français en colonies. Expériences inaugurales dans l’enseignement primaire* (Paris: L’Harmattan, 2010), pp. 139-156; Yvonne Turin, *Affrontements culturels dans l’Algérie coloniale. Écoles, médecines, religion, 1830-1880* (Paris: François Maspero, 1971).

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