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How men erased women from the founding narrative of International Relations

Erased: A History of International Thought Without Men by Patricia Owens reveals how men diminished women's role in shaping International Relations as an academic discipline in Britain. Drawing on meticulous research, this compelling book highlights how this erasure took place and restores the scholarship of these overlooked women to its rightful place in the story of IR's history, writes Shireen Manocha.

***Erased: A History of International Thought Without Men.* Patricia Owens. Princeton University Press. 2025.**

Uncovering women's buried contributions to International Relations

Professor Patricia Owens' 2025 book, *Erased: A History of International Thought Without Men*, takes on the crucial task of bringing to light the invisibilised contributions of women in the construction of International Relations (IR) as a discipline in Britain. Her carefully chosen cohort, including Lucie Barbier Zimmern, Margery Perham, Eileen Power, Lucy Philip Mair, Lilian Friedländer Vránek, Merze Tate, Agnes Headlam-Morley, Claudia Jones, Margaret Cleeve, Coral Bell, Rachel Wall, Susan Strange (9) among others, represents the female figures who were instrumental in the foundation of IR, but whose contributions were later erased from the history of how the discipline developed. As the book shows, there were not only barriers to entry for women in the academy, but even those who overcame them were systematically erased. The book is an important addition to scholarship recovering the history of the discipline by centring voices that have been marginalised (see, for example, [Owens, et. al., 2022](#)) as a Eurocentric, masculine narrative prevails.

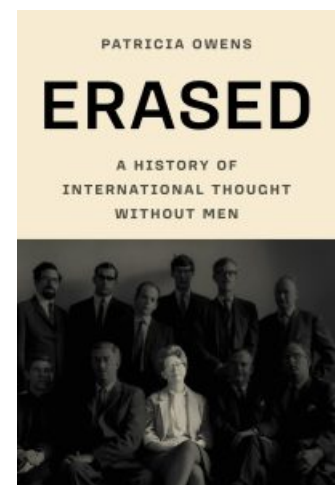


IR was a feminised field at the time of its construction – it was only later that the contributions of the women were erased.



Owens argues that women's diverse scholarship shaped both the content and method that IR came to emphasise. A significant example of how one such contribution was erased is in the 'first great debate', usually considered foundational to the establishment of the discipline. Rather than the realism/idealism debate, Owens instead suggests, it was the debate between Nicholas Spykman and Lucie Zimmern – between the former's American social science imagination of IR and the latter's focus on polyphonic internationalism (35-36) – that shaped future IR debates (43). Chapter one traces Zimmern's central role in establishing The Geneva School of International Studies, as well in structuring its intellectual agenda (28). She also led an emphasis on "cultural internationalism" (with a focus on music, cinema etc. from around the world) (31-32) in the study of IR. Yet, disciplinary histories only remember her in relation to her husband, Alfred Zimmern (27). As Owens insists, IR was a feminised field at the time of its construction (4) – it was only later that the contributions of the women were erased.

Across the 11 chapters, Owens traces the lives, journeys, and experiences of the cohort of women. She dives into their scholarship, teaching and disciplinary beliefs; their personal backgrounds and how those shaped their trajectories; their experiences with academia and the university setting; and finally the ways in which their work was either undermined, marginalised, or actively forgotten. The various characters either meet or do not at different points in the construction of the discipline, and this too determines the trajectory – not only of their own careers but the discipline itself. This includes both the powerful men that these women encounter, as teachers, colleagues, lovers, as well as the relationships between the women themselves, how they receive knowledge and support from each other and how they impact each other's careers.



How men pushed women's work to the margins

This choice to examine the personal lives of the women – their partners, family backgrounds, financial and health situations – demonstrates how the personal is indeed the political. Owens focuses, importantly, on the intimate/casual/informal spaces where IR and its debates were shaped, specifically by women, and then left out of disciplinary histories. In this way, she also uncovers the construction or formation of the discipline beyond the university – the “wives” of IR who would write and edit chapters, but never be credited. This resonates with the **feminist understanding of the division of labour into the public and the private**, where the latter, the work of the women that helped men publish, is sidelined. Owens shows how formulating a discipline goes beyond academia and what is defined as “intellectual” work.



The development of IR was interlaced with the legacies of empire: it was in parallel to and against the discourses on empire that IR was manifested as a discipline.



Additionally, the detailed descriptions of the experiences of the women within the academy and beyond also demonstrates the different ways in which invisibilisation and marginalisation are imposed structurally and institutionally. For example, the book shows that the project of a “separate discipline of IR” was defined against the very scholarship that was primarily the domain of women: in prioritising sociological approaches, the historical work of (mainly) women scholars was sidelined as “descriptive and non-analytical” (108). The erasure shows up in many ways, most revealingly in a “politics of memorialisation,” where debates about whether the women and their contributions should or should not be honoured – and at what moment of history – are illustrative of the devaluation of their work, as in the case of Margaret Cleeve (64).

Race, empire and the erasure of non-white scholars

The intersections of race, class, and gender also work to marginalise and erase women’s contributions. It is impossible to forget that the development of IR is interlaced with the legacies of empire: it was in parallel to and against the discourses on empire that IR was manifested as a discipline. (For more on empire, imperialism and IR, see: **Barkawi, 2010; Bayly, 2021**). In the 1950s

and 60s, with the empire continuing to be a reality, “imperialism” vanished from the subject-matter of the discipline of IR (209). This led to the contributions of black and brown scholars being sidelined and erased from what came to be British IR (208-209). Thus, although “Claudia Jones was one of the most influential international thinkers in 1950s and 1960s Britain,” (209) the later equation of “British” with “white” meant that her contributions did not make it into the canon of British IR (230-231).

Additionally, the complexity that the book is dealing with is also underlined in the fact that many of these women were imperialists. Though we may take issue with their politics, it remains important to highlight the scholarship and work of these women because it determined the paths the discipline did or did not follow.



The book successfully challenges the masculine, selective story of IR, brings women’s work to light and excavates the interlinked hierarchies, those of race, class, empire, sexual identity etc, that work to marginalise the women.



A landmark re-appraisal of the discipline

The book’s methodological rigour is impressive. Owens goes into great detail – uncovered through her close reading of official papers, manuscripts, personal papers and the like – to piece together the lives, journeys and work of these women, and the different challenges they faced at the time, as well as how they eventually came to be erased. Most interestingly, in the case of Rachel Wall (Chapter 10), Owens reads through her personal notes, medical reports, university reports and the like to piece together the story of how her own health condition was used to push her out of the academy. Drawing on this rich research, the book is written in a compelling, easy-to-read manner, the stories weaving into a seamless narrative.

The title of *Erased* perhaps underplays the work the book does in highlighting just how active and calculated the endeavour of effacing women’s contribution to the discipline was. This erasure was perpetrated largely *by* men – not without them. The book successfully challenges the masculine, selective story of IR, brings women’s work to light and excavates the interlinked hierarchies, those

of race, class, empire, sexual identity etc, that work to marginalise the women. (I am grateful to Dr James Morrison (LSE) for several engaging discussions on the points in this paragraph). Owens' milestone work invites future research that could pull more deeply on these threads. Overall, *Erased* is a must read for any serious student of the discipline. In highlighting these erasures, the book also reminds a new generation of female IR scholars the value of their own work and scholarship.

***Note:** This review gives the views of the author and not the position of the LSE Review of Books blog, nor of the London School of Economics and Political Science.*

***Image:** Photo Alfred and Lucie Zimmern (front row, centre), with students of the 'Zimmern School' © The European Consortium for Political Science's blog, The Loop.*

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About the author

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Shireen is a PhD candidate at the LSE Department of International Relations. Her research interests revolve around gender and nationalisms, particularly in South Asia. Specifically, she is interested in understanding whether (and how) Hindu nationalism is changing the gendered imaginations of India. She focuses primarily on the role of popular culture in constructing these shifting national imaginations.

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