

Review

Yoga in Britain: Stretching Spirituality and Educating Yogis, by Suzanne Newcombe. Sheffield: Equinox, 2019. xiv + 309 pp., £75.00 / \$100.00 (hb), £24.95 / \$36.00 (pb). ISBN 978-1-78179-659-7 (hb), 978-1-78179-661-0 (pb).

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Heeding the academy's call for context-sensitive studies of yoga, Suzanne Newcombe offers a detailed and well-researched analysis of the most significant forms of yoga that developed in Britain during the twentieth century. Though she presents research pertaining to the first half of the twentieth century (Ch. 1) as well as to the period following Thatcher's introduction of neoliberal economic policies in the early 1980s (Postscript), her research most carefully focuses on the development of yoga during the period between 1945 and 1980 (Chs. 2–8). Newcombe presents a substantial amount of data from this period revealing the diverse, 'complicated and multi-layered phenomenon' of British yoga (p. 270) as found in yoga publications, newspapers, television shows, music, photographs and personal interviews.

In Britain, Newcombe argues, 'Yoga was popularized in a way that suited a centralist, adult-education context which emphasized physical safety and health over enlightening transformations' (p. 6). Nevertheless, as she insightfully shows throughout and discusses at length in Chapter 8, 'a general "seekership" attitude', if not explicit, is frequently lurking in practitioner's 'private explorations of ideology outside the yoga class' (p. 229). While skillfully engaging media theory in one chapter concerning 'Yoga on the Telly' (Ch. 6) for example, Newcombe demonstrates how yoga's 'tacit soteriological and spiritual' implications remained possibilities for practitioners as they imagined 'their own meaning for the exercises' (p. 179)—even if they were just following Richard Hittleman on TV.

Newcombe's book begins by taking a journey through popular early twentieth-century bookstores and publishing houses such as Watkins Bookshop, Atlantis Bookshop, Penguin, and Allen & Unwin, all of which sold texts about yoga that catered to Britain's middle and upper classes who were

looking for ‘alternatives to the Church of England’ (p. 9) (Ch. 1). Newcombe shows how these notable bookstores and publishers acted as ‘social networks’ that ‘connected the largely independent readers and their solitary practices’ and ‘set the agenda of how yoga was presented and defined’ (p. 10). The introduction of popular literature on yoga during this early period—especially in paperback format—Newcombe suggests, created ‘a ready-made market for the local education authority evening yoga classes’ (p. 39).

Following this insight, Newcombe presents a rich history of the development of yoga education in Britain that eventually led to the incorporation of yoga classes emphasizing ‘physical exercises promoting health and relaxation’ (pp. 49–50) in the government-subsidized Local Education Authority’s (LEA) evening adult education program (Ch. 2). While ‘originally designed for working men’s self-improvement’, Newcombe shows, ‘the middle classes attended LEA evening classes for leisure’ (p. 54), yoga being among the many non-vocational course options students had to choose from (and which did not, as Newcombe shows, diverge ‘too much from what society found generally acceptable’ (p. 74)). Readers also learn about the immeasurable influence that Wilfred Clark, founder of the British Wheel of Yoga, exerted on this adult yoga education. Clark, as we see, set the foundations for certifying yoga teachers and set an early precedent for an interdisciplinary ‘Soft Orthodoxy’ (p. 229) requiring yoga teachers to holistically balance ‘postures, breathing, meditation, concentration exercises, and philosophy’ (p. 70) in all yoga courses in order to help students achieve ‘both better health and spiritual liberation’ (p. 229). Clark’s approach stands in surprisingly stark contrast to that of yoga guru B. K. S. Iyengar, as the latter ‘focused almost completely on instruction in asana’ (p. 238) and encouraged his students to ‘find their own way’ when it came to spiritual matters (p. 239).

Though the British Wheel of Yoga itself explicitly avoided assigning guru status to any one particular figure, Newcombe illustrates how a number of ‘charismatic gurus’ (p. 75) appeared on the British yoga scene. In one chapter, she takes readers on a trip through the 1960s and 1970s when British yoga was ‘both counter-cultural and mainstream’ (p. 174) as it interfaced with popular understandings of Indian culture expressed by mainstream musicians such as the Beatles and George Harrison as they interacted with gurus like Maharishi and Swami Prabhupada, even as anti-capitalist communes like the Centre House and Gandalf’s Garden resisted popular culture (Ch. 5). Following Max Weber’s theories concerning charisma, Newcombe specifically presents the compelling case studies of two charismatic gurus in Britain—B. K. S. Iyengar and Yogini Sunita—arguing that ‘an important contribution to the popularisation of yoga as a global phenomenon has been the institutionalisation of charisma’ (p. 75) (Ch. 3). On the one hand, Yogini Sunita, who taught ‘Pranayama Yoga’ (p. 79), ‘never developed...a bureaucratic framework for transferring her knowledge’ (p. 76) and thus ‘neither organized nor standardised her teaching in a way that made national popularization possible’

(pp. 85–86). On the other hand, as Newcombe demonstrates, Iyengar integrated ‘his distance-teaching with the structure of the LEA’ (p. 87). In doing so, she argues, ‘Iyengar routinized his charisma so that a recognizable teaching of yoga could continue in his absence’ (p. 76). Furthermore, as Newcombe later shows (Ch. 7), Iyengar (as well as many other non-medical organizations such as The Yoga for Health Foundation) persevered by avoiding ‘conflict with other realms of society’ through the dissemination of trainings in yoga therapy that were beyond mere vocational work and yet still deferred to the expertise of the medical profession (p. 206).

One particularly important contribution of this book is Newcombe’s account of the very gendered nature of an ‘ostensibly gender-neutral; British Yoga wherein ‘70-90 per cent of the students in classes were women’ (p. 109). Today, transnational yoga remains a predominantly female practice, and Newcombe’s study helps us understand some of the origins of this phenomenon as they developed in the 1960s and 1970s in Britain (Ch. 4). For British women, the broader ‘national agenda of individual responsibility for health and well-being’ resonated with a female audience seeking yoga not in a ‘narcissistic quest for lost youth’ but rather to help them fulfill their “‘traditional” responsibilities’ while pursuing, ‘in a socially acceptable way, feelings of freedom and autonomy’ (p. 110).

Newcombe’s readers will discern that while British yoga has a distinctive taste and flair that has ‘been globally influential on how yoga is practiced’ (p. 6), yoga in Britain is also simultaneously the product of the impact of influential international characters and multiple transnational discourses. In this regard, I at times found myself wanting some of the research data to be more generously contextualized to help readers—particularly yoga practitioners—understand modern yoga’s transnational nature. Perhaps most broadly, it would have been helpful to have a more in-depth review of existing literature at the beginning of the book regarding the interface between Britain and India during the colonial period. This period was instrumental in shaping later forms of modern yoga, and having some basic background would have helped unfamiliar readers understand why, for example, Wilfred Clark could not reconcile the yoga philosophy he was learning (which was selectively canonized by British and Indian elites during the colonial period) with his observations of ‘Indians tying themselves in knots’ (p. 58) (practices that were marginalized and censored from the aforesaid canon). Having said this, Newcombe is explicitly concerned with a research period that is largely post-colonial and she does leave a robust trail of scholarship in her citations and bibliography pertaining to these issues that her readers can follow on their own if they wish.

Consolidating much of Newcombe’s exceptional modern yoga research over the years, this book is an important contribution to the field of modern yoga studies and to those studying contemporary South Asian religions more broadly as it provides scholars and yoga practitioners with an original,

detailed, and yet easy-to-read history of the development of yoga theory and praxis as it interfaced with twentieth-century Britain. In addition to being useful in undergraduate, graduate and yoga practitioner educational settings, it will more broadly help us all, as Newcombe writes, to ‘educate ourselves to face the future—not necessarily with clear answers, but hopefully with fewer erroneous assumptions, less prejudice, and more empathy’ (p. 7).