Susie Protschky, *Photographic Subjects: Monarchy and Visual Culture in Colonial Indonesia*. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2019, 264 pp., ISBN: 9781526124371, price: GBP 80.00 (hardcover).

In the final chapter of this lucidly argued and meticulously researched study of the relationship between mass photography, monarchy, and Dutch imperial rule, Susie Protschky offers her readers a remarkable historical detail: upon being sent to the Indies to squelch the Indonesian revolution, Dutch soldiers received blank photo albums from their government (p. 192). That Dutch soldiers were exhorted to document their participation in counter-insurgency actions suggests at once an extraordinary naiveté about what those albums might ultimately record and a savvy recognition that the camera provided a powerful means of binding individuals across—and to—a far-flung empire. Indeed, within such albums, Dutch soldiers' photographs of Queens Day and other royal festivities attest to the durability of photographic practices and ways of seeing detailed in earlier chapters of the book. Not only was the queen's portrait often paraded as a ritual object of popular veneration in royal celebrations (chapter 2), but these events occasioned the production of both official commemorative albums and amateur photographs (chapter 3). They were also events at which various ethnic groups presented themselves to an absent queen's gaze (chapter 6). Protschky's attention to this arresting detail exemplifies how, throughout the book, she not only creatively mines overlooked historical sources like amateur photography albums and other popular images, but forcefully demonstrates the importance of photography in producing a new popularized form of monarchy within an imperial context.

Protschky's principal argument is that photography's emergence as a mass phenomenon and a popular pastime fostered new relations between diverse Dutch and colonial subjects and the monarchy. The omnipresence of Queen Wilhelmina's portrait in the Indies is well known to historians and readers of colonial memoirs and novels, and other scholars of empire have described the political uses of orchestrated spectacles in colonial settings. Protschky's contribution is to go beyond treating these as propaganda foisted upon a passive audience, emphasizing instead the participatory potentials of photography. Informed by recent currents in photography studies, she attends not only to the ideological messages *within* the photographs but also to the materiality of images as objects in the world and to the social practices that occur around them. As people engaged in actions like posing in front of festooned images of the queen, participating in and photographing royal celebrations, presenting the queen with commemorative albums, filling their family albums with clip-pings about the royal family, sending photos and postcards to distant family

BIJDRAGEN TOT DE TAAL-, LAND- EN VOLKENKUNDE

© KAREN STRASSLER, 2020 | DOI:10.1163/22134379-17604010

This is an open access article distributed under the terms of the CC BY-NC 4.0 license.

Downloaded from Brill.com04/26/2023 12:32:54PM
via free access

members, and so on, they actively situated themselves in relation to the Dutch empire, as embodied in its queen. They became “photographic subjects”: both subjected to a form of rule powerfully mediated by photography, and agents who often strategically negotiated their position within the empire by posing for, making, collecting, displaying, and gifting photographs of, about, and for the queen.

Protschky persuasively demonstrates that royal photographs were more than mere surrogates for the queen (neither Wilhelmina nor any other Dutch monarch ever set foot in the Dutch East Indies). Rather, the queen’s physical absence was productive: the proliferating traffic in images incited by her non-appearance generated affective attachments and afforded new political possibilities (chapters 2 and 3). Questions of absence and photographic proxies emerge again in chapter 5, where Protschky examines “snapshot diplomacy” conducted by the traditional rulers of Java with the Dutch queen. Here Protschky offers a sensitive analysis of indigenous rulers’ refusal to present themselves in person to the queen. Instead, they deployed photography to negotiate a nuanced positioning as sufficiently deferential to her authority yet retaining the dignity of their own status as rulers. Observing closely the divergent strategies of three Javanese kings in terms of bodily positioning, sartorial choices, and, in the case of Hamengkebuwono IX, the refusal to appear at all within albums he presented to the queen, Protschky provides a subtle analysis of imperial politics conducted through the medium of photography.

Another important move Protschky makes is to insist on an analytic frame uniting metropole and colony. At times, such a scope reveals ways the colony operated as a laboratory for visual rhetorics that were later deployed “at home” in the Netherlands. In chapter 4, which focuses on images of electric illumination at royal festivals as they helped to cement an association of the monarchy with the promise of development and enlightened rule, we learn that this imagery appeared in colonial commemorative books in the 1920s and only began to feature in Netherlands-based publications in the late 1930s. In both locations, the iconography of enlightened, modern rule materialized in electricity displays became salient in the context of political threat: the rise of nationalism, communism, and Islamism in the Indies in the 1920s, and the threat of war in Europe in the late 1930s. Significantly, moreover, Protschky’s research suggests that the iconography of electric illumination appeared in amateur albums before it became a salient motif of official commemorative books. Her findings thus reverse the expectation that royal iconography traveled from the metropole to the colony and from official sources into the realm of popular imagery. Chapter 6, meanwhile, describes a more synchronous development of iconographies as people, ideas, and practices crisscrossed between metro-

pole and colony. A concern for (photographically) preserving the “authentic” and “primitive” regional folk traditions of the Netherlands emerged at the same time that the colonies were experiencing the rise of a popular “ethnographic way of seeing” in which—particularly at royal festivals and in the photos they occasioned—the varied ethnic groups of the colonies presented themselves in colorful arrays of exotic difference. Both in Europe and in the Indies, then, the monarchy figured as an institution of unification, harmonizing diverse populations within the empire’s embrace. Yet Protschky is also attentive to crucial differences in the racial politics of these displays; whereas the queen signaled her embodiment of the Dutch nation by donning (and being photographed wearing) the regional costumes of her Dutch subjects, she never wore an indigenous costume from one of her colonies.

In her discussion of the queen dressing in regional costume, and throughout the book in referring to the Dutch monarchs as “female kings,” Protschky highlights the salience of gender to the form of popular monarchy enabled by the advent of mass photography. In chapter 3, focused on family photography, she looks at how photographs of royal festivals and personages found their way into personal photo albums, and at how representations of the queen began to assume the conventions of family photography, particularly during Juliana’s reign. Foregrounding her status as wife and mother, these domestic scenes democratized the queen’s image, rendering her an intimate figure of affection and identification, while also signaling her crucial role in securing the continuity of the empire. The genre of family photography thus figures centrally in the emergence of “ordinary royalty” characteristic of a modern, parliamentary monarchy.

If *Photographic Subjects* left me wanting anything, it was more time to linger on particularly striking images or moments that were treated rather briskly as they helped move the argument forward. This desire to delve in, to open up the material even further, is, however, testament to the richness of the vernacular and official archive Protschky has so brilliantly assembled and draws on with such skill throughout the book. She attends carefully to both the form and content of images, albums, commemorative books, and photographic collections. Several collections provide material for more than one chapter, demonstrating her ability to draw varied insights from these previously underutilized sources. Her analyses also benefit from wide reading not only in scholarship on colonial Indonesia and Dutch history, but in anthropology, art history, visual and photography studies, and history more broadly. Beyond its obvious contribution to scholarship on the Dutch colonial empire, the book has important things to say to anyone interested in histories of photography, monarchy, or imperialism. Above all, it is a detailed and substantive contribution to our understanding

of photography as both a technology of rule and a medium of popular political communication, identity, and subjectivity. *Photographic Subjects* gives further weight to the recognition that we cannot think about politics since the late nineteenth century—including the politics of twentieth century imperial monarchies—without reckoning with the camera.

Karen Strassler

City University of New York, New York City, NY, USA

karen.strassler@qc.cuny.edu