

Britain's Experience of the Empire in the Twentieth Century, by Andrew Thompson (ed.) Oxford University Press, 2011, 368 pages. ISBN: 978-0-19-923658-9, Hardback, £35

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Over the past thirty years the study of the British Empire has risen to the forefront of British historical study. Students of modern and contemporary history are now confronted with a vast array of 'new imperial histories'. Foremost amongst the literature is the schism between 'minimalist' 'Porterans' and 'maximalist' 'MacKenzieites'¹ who continue to dispute the true nature of 'popular imperialism' in Britain (p.21). Recently, the empire has experienced a revival amongst the wider public imagination – led by politicians, journalists and historians alike. A glut in television documentaries and popular histories - often sentimental, oversimplified or apologist accounts – can make the topic seem tired and over-scrutinized.² Nevertheless, there is undisputable merit in the continued investigation into the impact of empire upon British culture, past and the present. But any new history must seek to provide an innovative approach to avoid falling into the same theoretical dead ends.

Andrew Thompson aims to achieve this in a number of ways. The dearth in focus of the mid-twentieth century amongst works of historians embracing the cultural turn and 'new imperial history' is rightly addressed here (p.5). Methodologically, Thompson and his contributors take a pluralistic and malleable theoretical stance: that international, domestic and imperial events and influences are intrinsically imbricated with one another and that the empire's 'impact upon Britain was pervasive, but Britain's embrace of that empire more tentative' (p.31). Thompson stresses the difficulty of making generalisations when faced with this 'bewildering variety of influences', and growing pluralism in British society (pp.24-31). Evident throughout are a variety of underlying themes: the intricacy of the ties and inseparability of Britain from its empire during the twentieth century; the way that the empire acted as a lens through which policy-makers and the populace as a whole viewed the world; the role of the 'special relationship' with the United States and Britain's unravelling 'world powerdom'; and the withering of the definition and perceptions of 'empire' through the twentieth century (p.14). In sum, the British people were influenced by their empire, whether they liked it or not.

A cadre of experts in the history of politics, economics, religion, international relations, race, gender, identity and popular culture, join Thompson in providing 'a detailed focus upon the ways in which the empire was experienced in Britain'. Philip Murphy opens with an account

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¹ For a summary of the debate see: Porter, B. "Empire, What Empire?" Or, Why 80% of Early- and Mid-Victorians Were Deliberately Kept in Ignorance of It," *Victorian Studies*, Winter (2004): 256-263; MacKenzie, J.M. "Comfort" and Conviction: A Response to Bernard Porter', *The Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History*, 36: 4, (2008) pp. 659-668.

² See Jackson, W. 'Review of *The British Empire Debate*', <http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews/review/1216> Date accessed: 04.04.2012; and Conrad, P. 'Toeing the Empire line: Niall Ferguson's vision of the British Empire as a 'Good Thing' fails to address the perils of possession' *The Observer*, 05.01.2003.

of Britain's changing role as a global power which emphasises the exploitation of the Anglo-American 'special relationship' in retaining a 'place at the top table' (p.33). The metropolitan-colonial entanglement in religious thought and practice, and British political thinking are explored in chapters by Jeffrey Cox and Richard Whiting respectively, while economic historian Jim Tomlinson emphasises the longevity of the idea of the empire as 'privileged economic space' and argues for the centrality of the British Empire in the development of globalization (p.212).³

Wendy Webster writes an excellent article showing how pre-1945 anti-alienism directed towards white European immigrants was substituted for racism directed at post-WW2 Commonwealth immigrants. Until the recent resurgence in anti-European white-racism, white European and Commonwealth immigrants were largely invisible after 1945 (p.129). The post-war arrival of a large influx of Caribbean and South Asian immigrants was greeted with a surge of racism and xenophobia which conveniently disremembered the 'war-debt' Britain owed to the peoples of its empire (pp.125-126). Webster shows that British negative attitudes towards immigration were by no means monolithic: Britain's self-image in this period as a liberal nation was often contrasted with South African Apartheid and Southern American institutional racism. This prided libertarianism, though, rarely stretched to embracing multiculturalism in the 1960s and 1970s. Finally, Webster also looks at the role that this 'reversal of the colonial encounter' (p.125) had in its effect upon 'policy, attitudes, and experiences' in a profound manner – in particular in popular media such as film and literature (p.127).

Thompson's own chapter argues once more for the significant role of the empire in British popular imagination. Much of the research in this essay draws from his seminal *Empire Strikes Back?* (2005) but it still provides a detailed and revealing discussion of the complexities of the colony-metropole relation. Perhaps of greatest interest is the 'Legacies' section, which investigates the period of decolonisation and its pervasive impact upon British psychology and mentality. In particular Thompson cites returning groupings, such as civil servants and the ex-military carrying empire home with them, and the role of comedy and satire in expressing a general disillusionment with the constructs of imperial culture: "duty", "loyalty", "hierarchy", and "authority" (p.291). The true merit in Thompson's approach is his tendency towards a more inclusive and open understanding of the diverse and multifarious routes through which empire impacted upon the British metropole. His other major contention is that the British still experience 'a living relationship to their imperial past' and research into the British Empire should continue with vigour as long as "new" empires and imperialisms' exist (p.296).

In the finest chapter of the book, Krishnan Kumar examines the relation between the 'Britannic' identity of the empire and the national identities of the constituents of the United Kingdom. Kumar posits that as the 'outer empire' – the overseas territories – collapsed, the 'inner empire' of the United Kingdom's 'glue has begun to melt' (p.324). To counter the prominence granted to class divisions in the 'minimalist' theses of Porter and Cannadine,⁴ Kumar claims that rather than isolating the majority of the population from empire, they 'shared a vision of British society as ordered, graded, and hierarchical' both 'shaped the empire...in the image of the home society' and encouraged popular interaction with it (p.303). This convincing reappraisal is perhaps one of the most impressive sections of the book. Furthermore, Kumar's concept of a 'banal imperialism' – the everyday 'infusion' of empire, regardless of active awareness – provides a fruitful new construct for historians to address issues of 'popular

³ A line of argument expanded upon in: Thompson, A.S. & Magee, G.B. *Empire and Globalisation: Networks of People, Goods and Capital in the British World, c.1850–1914*, (Cambridge, 2010).

⁴ Cannadine, D. *Ornamentalism: How the British Saw Their Empire* (Oxford, 2001).

imperialism' (p.301). Kumar's essay concludes with an assessment of the various present day British national identities. Of particular pertinence is the assertion of the lack of a distinctive 'English' identity as a direct result of the previous role of England as the dominant party in both British empires (pp.325-328).

Thompson concludes that for the British 'the legacies of their empire are not only still with them, they may yet have fully to unfold' (p.345). This has doubtless never been truer, with economic and diplomatic uncertainty of the UK.⁵ Historians and students in a variety of fields will unquestionably benefit from a thorough reading of this volume. The book's more pluralistic and 'open' understanding of imperial connectedness is a welcome addition to the 'popular imperialism' debate, if not a revolutionary one. These authors ably situate cultural, economic, political and social developments within the wider history of Britain. Furthermore, like the 'Studies in Imperialism' scholars before them, they successfully exhibit some of the ways that the many parts of an imperial and post-imperial society interacted with one-another, and with the rest of the world. This volume has responses and provisos powdered and readied for the 'minimalist' imperial historians - though it offers nothing novel enough to satiate their numerous reservations and misgivings. An *addition* rather than a *revolution* in thinking, such an historical exploration of the empire and its legacies can reveal much about our contemporary world and should be amply commended.

⁵ See for example Gott, R. 'Let's end the myths of Britain's imperial past', 19.10.2011, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2011/oct/19/end-myths-britains-imperial-past>; Accessed: 04/04/2012 15:00: David Cameron: 'Britannia didn't rule the waves with her armbands on'.