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978-0-521-67002-9 - At Home with the Empire: Metropolitan Culture and the Imperial World

Edited by Catherine Hall and Sonya O. Rose

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CHAPTER ONE

*Introduction: being at home with the Empire**Catherine Hall and Sonya Rose*

What was the impact of the British Empire on the metropole between the late eighteenth century and the present?¹ This is the question addressed in a variety of ways and across different timescales in this volume. Such a question has a history that perhaps needs remembering: for it is both a repetition and a reconfiguration of a long preoccupation with the inter-connections between the metropolitan and the imperial. Was it possible to be ‘at home’ with an empire and with the effects of imperial power or was there something dangerous and damaging about such an entanglement? Did empires enrich but also corrupt? Were the expenses they brought worth the burdens and responsibilities? These questions were the subject of debate at least from the mid-eighteenth century and have been formulated and answered variously according both to the historical moment and the political predilections of those involved.

The connections between British state formation and empire building stretch back a long way, certainly into the pre-modern period.² It was the shift from an empire of commerce and the seas to an empire of conquest, however, that brought the political and economic effects of empire home in new ways. While the American War of Independence raised one set of issues about native sons making claims for autonomy, conquests in Asia raised others about the costs of territorial expansion, economic, political and moral.³ From the 1770s questions about the effects of empire on the metropole were never entirely off the political agenda, whether in terms of the worries about the impact of forms of Oriental despotism or the practice of slavery abroad on the liberties of Englishmen at home, debates as to the status of British subjects and British law across the empire, or

¹ Thanks to the contributors to this book for comments on this piece and to Bill Schwarz.

² For a discussion of some of the relevant material see David Armitage, ‘Greater Britain: A Useful Category of Historical Analysis?’ *American Historical Review*, 104 (2) (1999), 427–55. See also his *The Ideological Origins of the British Empire* (Cambridge, 2000).

³ See, for example, Eliga Gould, *The Persistence of Empire: British Political Culture in the Age of the American Revolution* (Chapel Hill, 2000); P. J. Marshall, ‘Empire and Authority in the Later Eighteenth Century’, *Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History*, 15 (2) (1987), 105–22.

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hopes for a 'Greater Britain' that could spread across the world.⁴ During the period that we cover in this book there were moments of profound controversy about the empire – about what form it should take, and what should be its purpose. How Britain's imperial stance was envisaged was always contested and changed over time. But there were few if any voices arguing the Empire should be disbanded, and that Great Britain should no longer remain an imperial nation. Important issues were seen as at stake in the metropolitan/colonial relation and both supporters and critics of empire recognised that Britain's imperial power could have consequences for her native population, never mind the effects on populations farther afield.

The chapters in this book are not solely concerned, however, with the political or ideological debates over empire, critical as these were. Rather, we argue that empire was, in important ways, taken-for-granted as a natural aspect of Britain's place in the world and its history. No one doubted that Great Britain was an imperial nation state, part of an empire. J. R. Seeley famously argued that the British 'seemed to have conquered and peopled half the world in a fit of absence of mind'.⁵ In commenting on this Roger Louis notes that 'he was drawing attention to the unconscious acceptance by the English public of the burdens of Empire, particularly in India'.⁶ It is this 'unconscious acceptance', whether of the burdens or benefits of empire, that we are in part exploring in this volume. The Empire's influence on the metropole was undoubtedly uneven. There were times when it was simply there, not a subject of popular critical consciousness. At other times it was highly visible, and there was widespread awareness of matters imperial on the part of the public as well as those who were charged with governing it. The majority of Britons most of the time were probably neither 'gung-ho' nor avid anti-imperialists, yet their everyday lives were infused with an imperial presence. Furthermore, important political and cultural processes and institutions were shaped by and within the context of empire. Our question, therefore, is not whether empire had an impact at home, fatal

⁴ See, for example, on Hastings, Nicholas Dirks, *The Scandal of Empire* (Cambridge, MA, 2006); on slavery, David Brion Davis, *The Problem of Slavery in the Age of Revolution, 1770–1823* (Ithaca, 1975); on Morant Bay, Bernard Semmel, *The Governor Eyre Controversy* (London, 1962); on the tradition of radical critics of imperialism, Miles Taylor, 'Imperium et Libertas? Rethinking the Radical Critique of Imperialism during the Nineteenth Century', *Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History*, 19 (1) (1991), 1–23.

⁵ J. R. Seeley, *The Expansion of England: Two Courses of Lectures* (London, 1883), 10.

⁶ Wm. Roger Louis, 'Introduction', in Robin W. Winks (ed.), *The Oxford History of the British Empire*, vol. V: *Historiography* (Oxford, 1999), 9.

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or not.⁷ Rather, we ask how was empire lived across everyday practices – in church and chapel, by readers at home, as embodied in sexualities or forms of citizenship, as narrated in histories? To what extent did people think imperially, not in the sense of political affiliations for or against empire, but simply assuming it was there, part of the given world that had made them who they were?

This question is possible precisely because we are no longer ‘at home’ with an empire. It is both the same and different from the questions which preoccupied both supporters and critics of empire prior to decolonisation. It is a reconfiguration – a new way of seeing associated with a different historical moment. Empire was always there between the eighteenth century and the 1940s, albeit in different forms with varied imperatives according to the particular conjuncture, different questions provoking debate about the metropolitan/colonial relation. But the questions were all thought within an imperial paradigm. After decolonisation that frame had gone and the end of empire has brought with it new concerns and pre-occupations. In the 1940s and 1950s the Empire was decomposing, despite attempts by Churchill and others to hold on. Capturing public imagination at the time were the sectarian and inter-tribal conflicts taking place as independence was granted to former dependencies. Decolonisation was figured by the government and in much of the press as relatively conflict-free. Unlike the French who were fighting an all-out war to keep Algeria French, the British public generally understood that Britain was making a graceful exit, defending the Commonwealth and keeping the interests of colonised peoples at the forefront of their policies. Yet we now know and to a certain extent it was known then but not always consciously registered, that the leave-taking from Malaya and Kenya was anything but peaceful. In the case of Kenya, as has recently been demonstrated, the Mau Mau rebellion was portrayed in the press as an outbreak of utter savagery on the part of the Kikuyu in the name of nationalism gone wild. It was repressed with horrific brutality by the Colonial administration with the full knowledge and complicity of the British government.⁸ Those suspected of active participation with Mau Mau were tried and hanged at the very same time that Parliament was debating the abolition of capital punishment by hanging in the metropole.⁹ Many thousands more, including women and

⁷ The reference is to P.J. Marshall, ‘No Fatal Impact? The Elusive History of Imperial Britain’, *Times Literary Supplement*, 12 March 1993, 8–10.

⁸ Caroline Elkins, *Britain’s Gulag: The Brutal End of Empire in Kenya* (London, 2005).

⁹ David Anderson, *Histories of the Hanged: The Dirty War in Kenya and the End of Empire* (New York, 2005), 7.

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children, were herded into detention camps where they suffered starvation, disease and death. Caroline Elkins has illuminated this terrible story, indicating that the facts about these camps were debated in parliament and received some coverage in the press. Yet, there was no public outcry. The reason for this, she argues, was that Mau Mau had been portrayed in the press and by the government as African savagery at its most primitive and violent.¹⁰ Some Afro-Caribbean migrants, arriving in England during this period, discovered that they were perceived through a Kenyan lens: 'Are you a Mau Mau lady?' Beryl Gilroy was asked.¹¹

The Empire had gone and was best forgotten. The West Indians and South Asians who were arriving were thought of as postwar migrants rather than imperial subjects with a long history connecting them to Britain. In the aftermath of the Second World War it was the great struggle between the United States and the Soviet Union that dominated global politics. Britain, no longer an imperial power, was drawn into the Cold War, a loyal supporter and friend of the USA, part of the West now united against communism. Modernisation would solve the problems of underdevelopment now that colonies were a thing of the past. It was not until the 1980s that questions about 'after empire' became high on the political agenda. This was associated with both the emergence of new forms of globalisation and, by the late 1970s and early 1980s, with the now substantial second-generation communities of black Britons in the inner cities making claims for equality and recognition. At the same time acknowledgement of the failure of new nations established after decolonisation brought with it a critique both of the limits of nationalism, and the recognition that while the political forms of empire had been dismantled, neo-colonialism and colonial ways of thinking were alive and well. This was the reconfiguration that made possible the emergence of a postcolonial critique from the 1980s – lifting the veil of amnesia about empires and making it imperative to recognise the persistence of their legacies. As Derek Gregory has put it, postcolonialism's critique disrupted the 'unilinear and progressive trajectory of episodic histories that dispatch the past to the archive rather than the repertoire'.¹² The collapse of the Soviet bloc and the end of the Cold War meant that the United States now emerged as *the* superpower and questions of empire began to arise anew, alongside reconfigured languages of civilisation and barbarism. The

¹⁰ Elkins, *Britain's Gulag*, 307–9.

¹¹ Beryl Gilroy, *Black Teacher* (London, 1976), 121, cited in Wendy Webster, *Englishness and Empire, 1939–1965* (Oxford, 2005), 123.

¹² Derek Gregory, *The Colonial Present* (Oxford, 2004), 265.

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dam that had earlier been erected against the memory of the British Empire broke down and in recent years books, television and radio programmes have poured out exploring that legacy in innumerable different ways. In this moment after one kind of empire (the British), and contemplating another (that of the United States), it has become not only possible but necessary to rethink the imperial relation in the light of the present, no longer inside but outside an imperial although postcolonial paradigm.

We are all too well aware of the dangers of focusing yet again on the British, to the neglect of the lives of colonial peoples across the Empire. Yet our object here is the metropole and the ways in which it was constituted in part by the Empire. Thus our focus in this book is on the period when the Empire existed and was a presence in metropolitan life: not on the equally important topic of the effects of empire after decolonisation. It is British history which is our object of study. Imperial historians have always thought in a variety of ways about the metropole, the seat of government and power, but British historians, those concerned with the national and the domestic, have seriously neglected the place of empire on that history. British history, we are convinced, has to be transnational, recognising the ways in which our history has been one of connections across the globe, albeit in the context of unequal relations of power. Historians of Britain need to open up national history and imperial history, challenging that binary and critically scrutinising the ways in which it has functioned as a way of normalising power relations and erasing our dependence on and exploitation of others. In exploring the ways in which the British were 'at home' with their empire, we aim to destabilise those relations and explore the dangerous parameters of white British culture.

A NOTE ON TERMINOLOGY

It is important that we define the terms that we are using here. This is no easy task for as any number of scholars have suggested, the central terms of 'empire' and 'imperialism', 'colony' and 'colonialism', 'race and racism' are slippery, contested, and their historical referents have changed over time. This is not the place to review and assess all of the different uses of these terms on offer. Instead, we will draw upon the work of other scholars in clarifying what we mean when we use these terms.

Empire is a large, diverse, geographically dispersed and expansionist political entity. A central feature of this unit is that it 'reproduces

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differentiation and inequality among people it incorporates'.¹³ Thus, at its heart, empire is about power, and is 'usually created by conquest, and divided between a dominant centre and subordinate, sometimes far distant peripheries'.¹⁴ In challenging the traditional focus on the centre/periphery relation scholars have recently emphasised the importance of connections across empires, the webs and networks operated between colonies, and the significance of centres of power outside the metropole, such as Calcutta or Melbourne. Thus, 'webs of trade, knowledge, migration, military power and political intervention that allowed certain communities to assert their influence . . . over other groups' are constitutive of empires.¹⁵ Empires also may be considered as 'networks' through which, in different sites within them, 'colonial discourses were made and remade rather than simply transferred or imposed'.¹⁶

Imperialism, then, is the process of empire building. It is a project that originates in the metropolis and leads to domination and control over the peoples and lands of the periphery.¹⁷ Ania Loomba helpfully suggests that colonialism is 'what happens in the colonies as a consequence of imperial domination'. Thus, she suggests that 'the imperial country is the "metropole" from which power flows, and the colony . . . is the place which it penetrates and controls'.¹⁸ One might add that the penetration often has been extremely uneven and that resistance on the part of the colonised has been central to that unevenness. As Guha has aptly put it, '(I)nsurgency was . . . the necessary antithesis of colonialism'.¹⁹

As Robinson and Gallagher argued long ago, imperialism can function without formal colonies, but the possession of colonies is essential to what is termed colonialism.²⁰ Colonies, themselves, differ enormously even within a particular empire such as the British Empire. The process of colonisation involves the takeover of a particular territory, appropriation of its resources and, in the case of the British Empire, the migration of people from the metropole outward to administer or to inhabit the

¹³ Frederick Cooper, *Colonialism in Question: Theory, Knowledge, History* (Berkeley, 2005), 26.

¹⁴ Stephen Howe, *Empire: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford, 2002), 30.

¹⁵ Tony Ballantyne, *Orientalism and Race: Aryanism in the British Empire* (Basingstoke, 2002); see also Tony Ballantyne and Antoinette Burton, 'Introduction', in Ballantyne and Burton (eds.), *Bodies, Empires and World History* (Durham, NC, 2005), 3.

¹⁶ Alan Lester, *Imperial Networks: Creating Identities in Nineteenth-century South Africa and Britain* (London, 2001), 4.

¹⁷ Ania Loomba, *Colonialism/Postcolonialism*, 2nd edn (London, 2005), 12. ¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ Ranajit Guha, *Elementary Aspects of Peasant Insurgency in Colonial India* (Delhi, 1983), 2.

²⁰ Ronald Robinson and John Gallagher, 'The Imperialism of Free Trade', *Economic History Review*, 2nd ser., 6 (1) (1953), 1–15.

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colony as settlers. Regardless, colonisation involves various forms of dispossession of those who lived on the lands prior to their being colonised.²¹ As Loomba has put it, colonisation meant ‘*un-forming* or *re-forming* the communities that existed there already’, often violently, and that would be the case whether or not people from the metropole went there to form their own permanent communities. Furthermore, colonial empires such as the British Empire were not omnipotent. They had to administer and assert control under constraints ‘intrinsic to the vastness and diversity of imperial spaces’ that inevitably aroused discontent among those who were subordinated in the process. At the same time imperial authority attempted to insist upon the idea that the Empire was a ‘legitimate polity in which all members had a stake’.²² One mode of exerting imperial power depended upon negotiating with existing colonial wielders of power, whether Indian *rajahs*, African ‘chiefs’, or mercantile or cultural elites, thus aligning the Empire with pre-existing social and cultural hierarchies. But this strategy coexisted both with attempts to offer all subjects of empire a form of belonging and with the persistent deployment of racial distinctions as a way of underscoring their superiority.²³

Although as James Donald and Ali Rattansi argue, people continue even today to act as if race was a fixed, objective category, most scholars recognise that not only is race not an essential, ‘natural’ category, but that the meanings and valence of race have changed historically.²⁴ Both during the heyday of the British Empire and its aftermath, race, in its many guises, ‘naturalises difference’ and reinscribes the always unstable distinction between coloniser and colonised. As a number of scholars have demonstrated, ideas about colonial difference became increasingly influential as they ‘intersected with, and helped to reformulate, British domestic discourses of class, ethnic and gender difference’.²⁵ Furthermore, the process by which the meanings of race became the focus and

²¹ Howe, *Empire*, 31. ²² Cooper, *Colonialism*, 28. ²³ *Ibid.*

²⁴ James Donald and Ali Rattansi (eds.), *Race, Culture and Difference* (London, 1992), 1–4.

²⁵ Alan Lester, ‘Constructing Colonial Discourse’, in Alison Blunt and Cheryl McEwan (eds.), *Postcolonial Geographies* (London, 2002), 38. See also Ann L. Stoler, *Race and the Education of Desire: Foucault’s History of Sexuality and the Colonial Order of Things* (Durham, NC, 1995), 104; Leonore Davidoff, ‘Class and Gender in Victorian England’, in Judith L. Newton, Mary P. Ryan and Judith R. Walkowitz (eds.), *Sex and Class in Women’s History* (London, 1983), 17–71; Joanna de Groot, ‘“Sex” and “Race”: The Construction of Language and Image in the Nineteenth Century’, in Catherine Hall (ed.), *Cultures of Empire: Colonizers in Britain and the Empire in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries* (Manchester, 2000), 37–60.

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product of scientific inquiry was intimately bound up with empire.²⁶ And although there was contestation about the fixity of racial distinctions over the course of the period covered by this book, the grounding of difference in ‘scientific’ authority and the creation of ‘the natural’ was a political process involving both colony and metropole.²⁷ Historically, racism and the ‘scientific’ authority behind the notion of immutable, biologically based difference were co-constitutive. The idea of race, like that of essential differences between women and men, was to become so widespread as to be part of the ‘taken-for-granted’ world in which the people of the metropole lived their lives. As G. R. Searle has put it, ‘the superiority of “whites” over “blacks” was widely treated as self-evident’.²⁸ This, however, does not mean that everyone was a racist just as everyone was not an imperialist. In Britain open conflict between people of different ‘racial’ or ‘ethnic’ origins was anything but constant, and, as Laura Tabili’s essay in this volume suggests, racial violence and antagonism may well have been the product of particular moments of economic and imperial crises. She argues that outside of these particular conjunctures people of different ethnicities could and did live relatively harmoniously. Yet when conflict did erupt Britons adopted and adapted ‘commonsensical’ or ‘taken-for-granted’ views of ‘natural’ difference that had been and continued to be present in metropolitan culture.

HISTORIOGRAPHY

The end of the European empires, the construction of new nation states and the major changes that took place in the world in the 1970s and 1980s resulted in shifts in patterns of historical writing, both in Britain and elsewhere. Here we are concerned with those effects in the writing of British history. Once Britain was no longer the centre of an empire and a great power, long-established assumptions about the writing of national history began to dissolve. A binary divide between nation and empire had been central to the nationalist historiography that emerged in mid-nineteenth-century Britain and survived for much of the twentieth. It was challenged by Seeley in the 1880s when he made the case for England’s past, present and future being intimately associated with that of its

²⁶ Catherine Hall, ‘Introduction: Thinking the Postcolonial, Thinking the Empire’, in Hall (ed.), *Cultures*, 19.

²⁷ Nancy Stepan, *The Idea of Race in Science: Great Britain, 1800–1960* (London, 1982); also see her ‘Race, Gender, Science and Citizenship’, in Hall (ed.), *Cultures*, 61–86.

²⁸ G. R. Searle, *A New England? Peace and War, 1886–1918* (Oxford, 2004), 32.

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empire.²⁹ His intervention, however, far from producing a more connected history, was significant in the development of imperial history as a separate subject. ‘The disjuncture between national and extra-national histories has been particularly abrupt within the history of Britain’, as David Armitage has argued.³⁰ English exceptionalism has indeed been difficult to dismantle built as it was on wilful amnesia, as Catherine Hall suggests in her essay on Macaulay in this volume. In the last twenty-plus years, however, efforts to reconnect the histories of Britain and empire and to challenge both the myopia of nationalist histories, and those forms of imperial history that do not engage with the metropole, have come from a variety of different sources and perspectives. Some are critical of the whole project of empire, others more revisionist in their focus, while some defend the imperial legacy.³¹ The various contributors to the debate over national history and its relation to the imperial have engaged with the different literatures to different degrees. What is clear is that this is a most productive area of historical research and one with which many of the protagonists feel passionately, albeit with very different investments and positions.

The 1960s and 70s saw a flowering of social history in Britain, but that work was for the most part resolutely domestic in its focus. By the 1980s increasingly sharp debates over questions of race and difference, riots in Britain’s inner cities, and the Falklands War put issues of empire firmly back on the historical agenda. Racism, as Salman Rushdie argued at the time, was exposing Britain’s postcolonial crisis.³² In this context some British historians who had been focused on the nation began to think more about empires. Work by anthropologists, themselves engaged in critical reflection on their discipline and its origins in colonial knowledge, provided important insights. Their refusal of the established lines of division between history and anthropology, one dealing with ‘modern’ peoples, the other with ‘primitive’ peoples, understood as without a history, destabilised conventional understandings. In 1982 Sidney Mintz and Eric Wolf, both influenced by Marxism, published classic texts which

²⁹ Seeley, *The Expansion of England*.

³⁰ Armitage, ‘A Greater Britain’, 428; Peter Mandler, *History and National Life* (London, 2002).

³¹ Obviously there have been crucial international influences – especially postcolonial theory and Subaltern Studies. But here we are confining our attention to the efforts by historians to reconnect the domestic and the imperial. We are also not discussing all the ideas that have come from historical geographers, those working in literary and visual culture etc., as this would have been a major essay in its own right.

³² Salman Rushdie, ‘The New Empire within Britain’, in *Imaginary Homelands: Essays and Criticism 1981–1991* (London, 1991).

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insisted on the importance of grasping the connections between peoples in different parts of the globe, the power relations between them, and the circuits of production, distribution and consumption within which they lived.³³ Mintz traced the history of sugar, from luxury to everyday commodity, in the process exploring the plantation as one of the formative sites of modern capitalist production. Sugar, he argued, was one of the first commodities to define modern English identities.³⁴ Wolf argued that it was no longer enough to write the history of the dominant or the subjugated. The world of humankind was a totality: it was the specialised social sciences which had insisted on separating out the parts. He aimed to 'delineate the general processes at work in mercantile and capitalist development, while at the same time following their effects on the micro-populations studied by the ethnohistorians and anthropologists'. In his account, 'both the people who claim history as their own and the people to whom history has been denied emerge as participants in the same historical trajectory'.³⁵

Another anthropologist, Bernard Cohn, again someone who was pre-occupied with the relationship between history and anthropology, has been a key figure in reshaping imperial history, bringing it into the same field as the history of early modern and modern South Asia.³⁶ One of his central preoccupations has been with the development of classificatory systems and the ways in which India was utilised as a laboratory for new technologies of rule. Long before the publication of Said's *Orientalism*, as Dipesh Chakrabarty has noted, Cohn 'was teaching his students in Chicago some of the fundamentals of the relation between knowledge and power' that shaped colonialism in South Asia and beyond.³⁷ His work, along with that of Thomas Metcalf, who has emphasised the play of similarity and difference as central to British conceptions of India, has significantly shifted understandings of the Raj.³⁸ Since the East India Company was London based, its shareholders, proprietors and Directors

³³ Mintz and Wolf were both drawing on the radical-Marxist critique of empire, which also informed work going on in Britain. See, for example, Michael Barratt Brown, *After Imperialism* (London, 1963); V. G. Kiernan, *The Lords of Human Kind: European Attitudes to the Outside World in the Imperial Age* (London, 1969).

³⁴ Sidney Mintz, *Sweetness and Power: The Place of Sugar in Modern History* (New York, 1985). David Scott, 'Modernity that Predated the Modern: Sidney Mintz's Caribbean', *History Workshop Journal*, 58 (2004), 191–210.

³⁵ Eric R. Wolf, *Europe and the People Without History* (London, 1982), 23.

³⁶ Bernard S. Cohn, *An Anthropologist Among the Historians and Other Essays* (Oxford, 1990); *Colonialism and its Forms of Knowledge: The British in India* (Princeton, 1996).

³⁷ Dipesh Chakrabarty, 'Foreword', in *The Bernard Cohn Omnibus* (Oxford, 2004), x–xi.

³⁸ Thomas R. Metcalf, *Ideologies of the Raj* (Cambridge, 1994).