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978-0-521-76353-0 - Nabobs: Empire and Identity in Eighteenth-Century Britain

Tillman W. Nechtman

Excerpt

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Introduction: an imperial footprint

It happen'd one Day about Noon going towards my Boat, I was exceedingly surpriz'd with the Print of a Man's naked Foot on the Shore, which was very plain to be seen in the Sand: I stood like one Thunderstruck, or as if I had seen an Apparition; I listen'd, I look'd round me, I could hear nothing, nor see any Thing; I went up to a rising Ground to look farther; I went up the Shore and down the Shore, but it was all one, I could see no other Impression but that one, I went to it again to see if there were any more, and to observe if it might not be my Fancy; but there was no Room for that, for there was exactly the very Print of a Foot, Toes, Heel, and every Part of a Foot; how it came thither, I knew not, nor could in the least imagine. But after unnumerable fluttering Thoughts, like a Man perfectly confus'd and out of my self, I came Home to my Fortification, not feeling, as we say, the Ground I went on, but terrify'd to the last Degree.¹

Daniel Defoe, *Robinson Crusoe* (1719)

The title character's discovery of a lone footprint on the sandy beaches of his isolated island kingdom marks a turning point in Daniel Defoe's early-eighteenth-century novel, *Robinson Crusoe*. Upon finding the footprint, Crusoe might have been thrilled. He had, after all, lived alone on his island for a considerable time. The footprint might have indicated rescue or, at the very least, companionship. By his own admission, however, Crusoe was "thunderstruck" by the discovery. He imagined at first that he had seen an apparition. Who but a phantom can leave just *one* footprint on a beach? Closer inspection of the footprint confirmed the discovery. It was real. It was material; it was, to quote the novel, "exactly the very Print of a Foot, Toes, Heel, and every Part." For Crusoe, the print's origin was uncertain, if not almost entirely implausible, and its meaning was profoundly unsettling. "I came Home to my Fortification," Crusoe reported, "not feeling, as we say, the Ground I went on, but terrify'd to the last Degree."

¹ Daniel Defoe, *Robinson Crusoe*, ed. Michael Singagel (New York: Norton, 1994), 112.

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The footprint on Crusoe's sandy beachhead is an apt imperial heuristic, a small but significant symbol of the global processes of British imperialism. As Edward Said noted, *Robinson Crusoe* stands not only as an early example of the English novel but also as a clear early link between the novel as a literary form and European imperialism as a geopolitical phenomenon.² In Defoe's novel, the sandy shore of Crusoe's beach is the geography of first contact, the lapping waves of the ocean represent the navigational channels of global seafaring, and the island itself is at once Crusoe's insular home and his imperial dominion.³

However, for *Robinson Crusoe* to function as an imperialist text, the title castaway cannot exist in isolation. In this sense, the discovery of the footprint is no small event as it forcefully declares the interactivity of Crusoe's plantation-building project. The footprint confirms that empire is a process that requires more than a single individual, for there can be no colonizer without somebody to colonize. Simultaneously, though, Crusoe recognized that the presence of somebody else within the borders of his island home marked a peril. He was not alone; his power was not unassailable; his existence was not *sui generis*. Until the moment when he stumbled upon that footprint on the beach, Crusoe considered himself the sole master of his island, admittedly a thin claim given that he was also the island's lone resident. But, that small, singular footprint announced the presence, the physical imprint, of an "other" – the silent infiltration of his island home by an unannounced and an unwelcome presence.

Robinson Crusoe is arguably literature's most famous castaway, and that lone and inexplicable footprint on his beachhead and his response to it reveal a great deal about Crusoe, his sense of self, and his own sense of the ambivalent relationship between his island home and his imperial agenda. Stranded on a small island and cut off from the rest of the world, Crusoe sought to control the narrative flow of his own story, but

² See Edward Said, *Culture and Imperialism* (New York: Vintage, 1994), 70. For more on the interpretive value of the footprint in *Robinson Crusoe*, see Srinivas Aravamudan, *Tropicopolitans: Colonialism and Agency, 1688–1804* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1999), 71–77. For more on *Robinson Crusoe* and imperialism, see Christopher Flynn, "Nationalism, Commerce, and Imperial Anxiety in Defoe's Later Works," *Rocky Mountain Review of Language and Literature* 54:2 (2000), 11–24; J. A. Downie, "Defoe, Imperialism, and the Travel Books Reconsidered," *Yearbook of English Studies* 13 (1983), 66–83; and Hans Turley, "Protestant Evangelism, British Imperialism, and Crusonian Identity," in Kathleen Wilson, ed., *A New Imperial History: Culture, Identity, and Modernity in Britain and the Empire, 1660–1840* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 176–193.

³ See Greg Dening, *Islands and Beaches: Discourse on a Silent Land. Marquesas, 1774–1880* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 1986); *Beach Crossings: Voyaging across Times, Cultures, and Self* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004), 68.

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there proved to be no straightforward way to convert a tale of isolation and shipwreck into one of expansion and conquest. Though his situation suggested that he was a failure as a global seafarer and though he seemed condemned to a life of solitude, to be alone on the island meant that Crusoe was insulated from the perils of the wider world. To find a footprint on the shore meant that there were others on his island, that he could be master of the island in more than just name. But, the price of mastery was the concomitant threat that Crusoe's control might be met with resistance and that Crusoe might find himself overwhelmed by this unknown and disembodied other.

Crusoe's dread at finding the footprint, then, was the result of a contradiction, for, as Kate Teltscher has suggested, "the assumption of colonial power marks the emergence of a much more precarious sense of self."⁴ The quest for domesticity and security, Crusoe came to realize, had the potential to compete with and contradict the ambition for empire and dominion precisely because Crusoe's domestic home and his imperial dominions were imbricated spaces, both firmly plotted on the same island.⁵ Stated another way, it is simply not possible to speak of Crusoe's "national" home as distinct from his "imperial" possessions, for the two are one and the same. The alarm that overwhelmed Crusoe upon his finding the footprint was a manifestation of his having come face to face with a geographic paradox. That single pedestrian impression braided his domestic world and his imperial project – two things he had previously understood to be distinct from one another – into a simultaneous narrative.

By invoking *Robinson Crusoe* at the outset of this work, I want to suggest that Crusoe and his island should be read as broadly emblematic of British national identity and of Britain, which is, after all, a small island nation. Because of its topography, Britain has historically profited from its being safely insulated against European history's vicissitudes and has simultaneously suffered for its being disadvantageously cut off from the continent and its resources. Despite having once held an empire that spanned nearly a quarter of the world's landmass, Britain itself is almost Lilliputian in relative geographic terms. Its smallness, Linda Colley has commented, meant that Britain lacked resources as well as population vis-à-vis its European competitors, and Britons have,

⁴ Kate Teltscher, *India Inscribed: European and British Writing on India, 1600–1800* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 7.

⁵ Leela Gandhi has aptly coined the phrase "postcolonial revenge" to describe the fear and terror generated when the colonizer realizes that his or her existence is, in fact, predicated on the imbrication of the self and the Other. See Leela Gandhi, *Postcolonial Theory: An Introduction* (Sydney: Allen and Unwin, 1998), x.

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at moments, been acutely aware that they and their island home have been “inherently and sometimes desperately vulnerable.”⁶ As Colley has argued, Britain’s geographic smallness and its subsequent historical aggressiveness are correlated. “Domestic smallness and a lack of self-sufficiency made for continuous British extroversion, not to say global house-breaking, violence and theft.”⁷ Colley’s observations, then, point us to the realization that there must be a fundamental synergy between Britain’s national identity and its imperial history – that Britain and the British empire were always leaving footprints upon one another.

Despite recent attempts, most notably by Bernard Porter, to downplay the significant interchange between Britain’s imperial and national histories, the interactivity between British and British imperial histories is hardly a new discovery.⁸ As early as 1883, J. R. Seeley argued that “the history of England is not in England but in America and Asia.”⁹ Perhaps best remembered for his claim that the English had “conquered and peopled half of the world in a fit of absence of mind,” Seeley was not openly suggesting that Britain and the British empire had always been the same thing; he was hardly the avatar of postcolonialism. Rather, as William Roger Lewis has noted, Seeley “intended [his reflection] as a provocative remark on the dynamics of British expansion. He was drawing attention to the unconscious acceptance by the English of the burdens of empire, particularly in India.”¹⁰ Influenced by intellectual currents in feminism, cultural history, subaltern studies, and postcolonial theory, late-twentieth-century scholars have, as Kathleen Wilson has noted, elaborated on Seeley’s formulation, arguing that just as the history of England is in America and Asia, the history of Asia and America is also the history of England.¹¹ Collectively, this body of scholarship has come to be labeled as “new imperial history,” and it has demonstrated, to quote Wilson, “that the ‘local’ and the ‘global’ have been difficult to disentangle since 1492.”¹²

⁶ Linda Colley, *Captives: Britain, Empire, and the World, 1600–1850* (London: Jonathan Cape, 2002), quote from 5; see also 1–5.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 10.

⁸ Bernard Porter, *The Absent-Minded Imperialists: Empire, Society, and Culture in Britain* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004).

⁹ J. R. Seeley, *The Expansion of England* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1971), 13.

¹⁰ William Roger Lewis, “Introduction,” in Robin W. Winks, ed., *The Oxford History of the British Empire*, 5 vols., Vol. v: *Historiography* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 9.

¹¹ Kathleen Wilson, “Introduction: Histories, Empires, Modernities,” in Wilson, *A New Imperial History*, 1–28 (3, 15).

¹² *Ibid.*, 15.

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Nabobs: Empire and Identity in Eighteenth-Century Britain does not seek to disentangle the “local” from the “global,” arguing instead that the two are so fully fused as to make any distinction between one and the other historically misleading and, indeed, undesirable. Admittedly, many have tended to imagine Britain and the British nation as distinct institutions. As Antoinette Burton has argued, much of the scholarship that has focused on Britain and its empire has “unconsciously conserved” the British nation as an analytic and an historical category that predates and is a prerequisite for the British empire. In this scholarship, the nation precedes the empire in a simple chronological progression.¹³ Assuming that the “new imperial history” is correct to suggest that the history of England happened in Asia and America and vice versa, this book seeks to understand the origins of the teleological mythology that has allowed historians, politicians, and the British themselves to imagine an intellectual and chronological distinction between the British nation and the British empire.

More importantly, this book argues that the imbrication of nation and empire as not, as Seeley might have argued, a matter of “absence of mind,” nor was the synergy between Britain and the British empire so “mundane” a part of ordinary Britons’ everyday lives as to be “taken-for-granted,” as Catherine Hall and Sonya Rose have suggested in the introduction to their noteworthy anthology *At Home with the Empire*.¹⁴ Though they insist that “empire was omnipresent in the everyday lives of ‘ordinary people,’” Hall and Rose also suggest that Britons from the eighteenth to the twentieth century were so constantly reminded of the intertwined relationship between domestic and imperial Britain that the reminding itself became “so familiar, so continual, that it [was] not consciously registered as reminding.”¹⁵

Moreover, Hall and Rose argue that Britons’ ability to be so “at home with the empire” was “dependent upon a geographical imagination that

¹³ Antoinette Burton, “Who Needs the Nation?: Interrogating British History,” in Catherine Hall, ed., *Culture of Empire: A Reader* (New York: Routledge, 2000), 137–153 (138). See also Antoinette Burton, *At the Heart of Empire: Indians and the Colonial Encounter in Late-Victorian Britain* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1998), 2–13; Martin W. Lewis and Karen E. Wigen, *The Myth of Continents: A Critique of Metageography* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1997), 8–9; David Armitage, *The Ideological Origins of the British Empire* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 3; and Kathleen Wilson, *The Island Race: Englishness, Empire, and Gender in the Eighteenth Century* (New York: Routledge, 2003), ix–x, 4–5.

¹⁴ Catherine Hall and Sonya O. Rose, “Introduction: Being at Home with the Empire,” in Catherine Hall and Sonya O. Rose, eds., *At Home with the Empire: Metropolitan Culture and the Imperial World* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 1–31 (2–3, 22).

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 22–25.

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bifurcated the political and economic space of empire into a bounded ‘home’ which was physically and culturally separated from the colonized ‘other.’” This bifurcation, they maintain, was a vital mask that shielded domestic Britons from the unsettling “violence upon which” imperial control was predicated. As Hall and Rose have suggested, an imaginative geographic sleight-of-hand does seem to have masked empire’s “shadowy presence” in the everyday lives of domestic Britons in the nineteenth century.¹⁶ *Nabobs*, though, looks to an earlier moment, and it argues that Britons have not always taken the creative geographic partition for granted, nor have they easily passed it over as a ubiquitous and nearly invisible tool of British imperialism. Rather, the geopolitically fruitful – though intellectually fictive – division between empire and nation only emerged out of a hotly contested public debate in the late eighteenth century.

To be certain, the century following the Act of Union between England and Scotland in 1707 witnessed the consolidation of a British political structure that bound together the two once-independent kingdoms.¹⁷ For all of the cohesive political power implied by the Act of Union, however, recent scholarship has substantially challenged the notion – most productively put forward by Linda Colley in her 1992 book *Britons: Forging the Nation, 1707–1837* – that the eighteenth century marked a moment when the British “came to define themselves as a single people.”¹⁸ Rather, as scholars such as Kathleen Wilson have argued, late-eighteenth-century Britain was a fraught political landscape where consensus about the make-up of the British nation was internally contradictory. Any common sense of what it meant to be British emerged from and only thinly veiled deeper contradictions. Late-eighteenth-century *Britain* was a political construction filled with individuals who all cherished their own specific and contingent perspectives of the new national center, and *Britishness* was a national identity that only precariously fused together the British Isles – the kingdoms of England, Scotland, and Wales – under a German royal dynasty and atop a multi-national, racially diverse, and geographically vast empire. As Wilson has adeptly shown, the emergent British identity was only a stable, solid center so long as complex divergences of race, class, and gender were obscured.¹⁹

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ For a history of the making of the Anglo-Scottish Union in 1707, see Allan I. Macinnes, *Union and Empire: The Making of the United Kingdom in 1707* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007).

¹⁸ Linda Colley, *Britons: Forging the Nation, 1707–1837* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992), 6.

¹⁹ Kathleen Wilson, *The Sense of the People: Politics, Culture, and Imperialism in England, 1715–1785* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 3–7. See also Kathleen

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At the same time, the emergence of Britain's eighteenth-century empire further complicated efforts to consolidate Britain and Britishness. On the one hand, empire had the potential to further absorb internal communities who might otherwise have objected to the rise of a hegemonic British identity defined as white, male, middle class, and Protestant. As Martin Dauntton and Rick Halpern have argued, "moving beyond the British isles to a consideration of empire" allows us to explore a world in which Irish Catholics and Scottish Highlanders, who were themselves subaltern at home, participated in the *British* national project of imperial conquest.²⁰

On the other hand, empire added new layers of difference to a process intended to "forge" a "single people," to borrow Colley's terminology. Empire introduced new racial and ethnic communities, new religious communities, new geographies, and new civilizations to the equation, and it forced new questions about the relationship between these communities and the communities of the British Isles. Was Britain something different than and apart from its empire, or were the two concomitant and mutually constitutive institutions? Was race an acquired or an inherent characteristic, and how did it factor into Britishness? How did gender influence an individual's relationship to British society? What accounted for differences between various societies within the empire? How should those differences be classified and valued? These questions all highlighted a philosophical and political investigation about identity that simultaneously occupied the minds of some of the Enlightenment's most influential thinkers.

In its insistence on the intertwined relationship between the British empire and the British nation, recent scholarly work in the "new imperial" tradition has demonstrated that eighteenth-century Britain was a particularly apposite landscape for these debates. Queries of this sort were bound at once to the eighteenth-century Enlightenment and its fascination with questions of individual and collective identity, and to the vicissitudes of British imperial history across the century, particularly the period from 1750 to 1800.²¹ As historians such as Vincent Harlow

Wilson, "Citizenship, Empire, and Modernity in the English Provinces, c. 1720–1790," *Eighteenth Century Studies* 29:1 (Fall, 1995), 69–96; and Wilson, *The Island Race*, 4.

²⁰ Martin Dauntton and Rick Halpern, "British Identities, Indigenous Peoples, and the Empire," in Martin Dauntton and Rick Halpern, eds., *Empire and Others: British Encounters with Indigenous Peoples, 1600–1850* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1999), 1–18 (5). See also C. A. Bayly, "The British and Indigenous Peoples, 1760–1860: Power, Perception, and Identity," in Dauntton and Halpern, *Empire and Others*, 19–41 (20).

²¹ Wilson, "Introduction," 6–7; Dorinda Outram, *The Enlightenment* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 55–58; Emmanuel Chukwudi Eze, ed., *Race and*

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have noted, the last fifty years of the eighteenth century were burdened by momentous transformations in British history. This was a period marked by a war with, and the loss of, Britain's colonies in North America; shifting dynamics of power and control in the Caribbean as a result of the early stirrings of the anti-slavery movement; economic shifts from mercantilism to capitalism; and the increasing significance of India as a matter of public and political concern – a “swing to the East,” to quote Harlow.²² All of these realignments served to highlight a sea change in British and British imperial history, a transition from the “first” British empire – an empire of commerce and of the seas – to a “second” British empire – an empire of conquest.

Assuming that the eighteenth century witnessed the steady advance of a consolidated sense of both Britain and Britishness too easily masks the complex forces at play in eighteenth-century British history. More importantly, such assumptions further obscure what Sudipta Sen has called the “unremarked-upon complicity” between the history of Britain and that of its global empire.²³ This book is an effort to demonstrate that the complicity between empire and nation in the second half of the eighteenth century was, in fact, undeniably remarked upon. Domestic Britons were acutely aware that the intellectual division of empire and nation was not immediately operational, and they were widely alert to the ways in which the British nation infused the British empire and of the ways the British empire infused the British nation.²⁴ Indeed, this book argues that domestic Britons in the late eighteenth century were particularly aware of the latter relationship and that, rather than taking the relationship for granted, they actively rejected the close affiliation of empire and nation precisely because the connection disturbed what they saw as the quotidian patterns of their daily, domestic, “British” lives. At the end of the day, many in

the Enlightenment (New York: Blackwell, 1997), 4–5; Isaac Kramnick, “Introduction,” in Isaac Kramnick, ed., *The Portable Enlightenment Reader* (New York: Penguin, 1995), xiii–xxiii (xiii–xiv); Dror Wahrman, *The Making of the Modern Self: Identity and Culture in Eighteenth-Century England* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004), 122–126, 274–282; Lisa Forman Cody, *Birthing the Nation: Sex, Science, and the Conception of Eighteenth-Century Britain* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 237–254.

²² Vincent T. Harlow, *The Founding of the Second British Empire*, 2 vols. (London: Longmans Green, 1952–1964), Vol. 1, 62–102.

²³ Sudipta Sen, *Distant Sovereignty: National Imperialism and the Origins of British India* (New York: Routledge, 2002), xxiv.

²⁴ To borrow a quote from Ann Laura Stoler, “these ties were not microcosms of empire but its marrow.” See Ann Laura Stoler, “Intimidations of Empire: Predicaments of the Tactile and Unseen,” in Ann Laura Stoler, ed., *Haunted by Empire: Geographies of Intimacy in North American History* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2006), 1–22 (3).

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eighteenth-century Britain found they were not “at home with the empire,” and they rather liked it that way.

In no context was this unhappy imbrication of empire and nation more visible to domestic Britons in the late eighteenth century than in the case of Britain’s Indian empire. Indeed, to many domestic observers, India was the fulcrum upon which the period’s major imperial changes teetered. In the last fifty years of the century, India was almost always a matter of public debate, as Peter Marshall has noted.²⁵ In these same years, the East India Company’s trade in Asian tea became the symbolic catalyst for a revolution in North America, highlighting the centrality of Indian administrative affairs in a wider array of British imperial contexts. As Philip Lawson observed, “no less than four ministries with four different prime ministers took power,” in the two-year period from April 1782 to April 1784. “Each had its own vision of how to proceed on the East India Company Issue, and at one time or another each presented its own India legislation.”²⁶

Rather than suggesting that the eighteenth century witnessed a dramatic and sudden “swing to the East,” *Nabobs* argues that India was always center stage in this period precisely because imperialism in India, even more so than in other locations, highlighted not only the shifting patterns of Britain’s imperial ventures, but also the spectral ways in which empire was a material presence in late-eighteenth-century Britain. This book, then, traces the British public’s response to the imprint that imperialism in India made in domestic Britain and the considerable public fracas caused as would-be “domestic Britons” struggled to articulate a strictly nativist sense of themselves and their island home. Like Robinson Crusoe, late-eighteenth-century Britons found it uncomfortable to discover empire’s footprint on Britain’s beaches.

However, those Britons who, like Crusoe, would have been frightened to find nation and empire in the same place were not the only participants in the struggle to define empire and nation as distinct categories. If Crusoe stands as an icon of domestic Britishness, his counterpart would be that subset of Britons who actually ventured from the domestic space we have come to think of as the “national center” and engaged themselves in the broader world that their domestic compatriots imagined to be the “imperial periphery.” These were the individuals who had

²⁵ P. J. Marshall, *Problems of Empire: Britain and India, 1757–1813* (New York: Barnes and Noble, 1968), 15–16.

²⁶ Philip Lawson, *The East India Company: A History* (New York: Longman, 1993), 123. For more on the global synergies of British imperialism in the late eighteenth century, see Philip J. Stern, “British Asia and British Atlantic: Comparisons and Connections,” *William and Mary Quarterly* 62:4 (2006), 725–742.

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experienced the would-be frontier between the nation and the empire, only to find that the complicity between the two splintered, to quote Sudipta Sen, “the normative binary of the self and the other in unexpectedly instructive ways.”²⁷ For those who went out into the imperial world, the experience of difference – not to mention the meaning of difference – was profoundly unlike the experience of those who never left the domestic landscape. Though there was a chance that a Protestant Scot and a Protestant Englishman might find enough in common to feel some connection, the type and degree of diversity that one witnessed around the imperial world – in North America, in the South Pacific, in India, or in Africa – refused elision. *Nabobs* argues that the potentially potent interplay between empire and nation was evident to no group more so than to this community of “imperial Britons.”

The complexity of both the history of the nation and the history of the empire tangled the simple dualisms that might otherwise have defined the nation and its people. To domestic observers, then, forging the nation not only meant erasing the domestic gaps, if not the domestic communities, that defied easy classification into a unitary model of Britishness; it was also a process that demanded a bright, clear boundary between nation and empire. As imperial pressures mounted around the globe in the wake of the victories of the Seven Years’ War in the 1760s to the end of the eighteenth century, this community of domestic Britons became even more interested in throwing up barriers between what they imagined as a stable, secure, and unitary British center and the tumultuous collection of outposts they called the empire.

To those who spent part of their lives in the imperial world – in many instances decades of their lives there – such a boundary made much less sense. Rather, to this community, a fluid nexus between empire and nation much more accurately described their own personal experience. They had been to the empire and seen its differences, and, not unlike a modern traveler collecting souvenirs, they typically returned with material objects that they had collected from throughout the imperial world. Imperial Britons, then, envisioned identity not as geographically rooted but rather as global and performative.²⁸ Their material collections narrated imperial Britons’ experiences – all of the movement, all of the connectivity, and all of the diversity of having been a resident not merely of Britain the small island nation but rather of a Britain that

²⁷ Sen, *Distant Sovereignty*, xxvii; and Wilson, *The Island Race*, 17.

²⁸ Burton, “Who Needs the Nation?,” 145; Wilson, “Introduction,” 8; and Greg Denning, *Performances* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 123.