

Evaluating Empire and Confronting Colonialism in Eighteenth-Century Britain

This volume comprehensively examines the ways metropolitan Britons spoke and wrote about the British Empire during the short eighteenth century, from about 1730 to 1790. The work argues that following several decades of largely uncritical celebration of the empire as a vibrant commercial entity that had made Britain prosperous and powerful, a growing familiarity with the character of overseas territories and their inhabitants during and after the Seven Years' War produced a substantial critique of empire. Evolving out of a widespread revulsion against the behaviors exhibited by many groups of Britons overseas and building on a language of "otherness" that metropolitans had used since the beginning of overseas expansion to describe its participants, the societies, and polities that Britons abroad had constructed in their new habitats, this critique used the languages of humanity and justice as standards by which to evaluate and condemn the behaviors, in turn, of East India Company servants, American slaveholders, Atlantic slave traders, British political and military leaders during the American War of Independence, and abettors of British oppression in Ireland, including ministerial authorities, placemen, and pensioners, and rapacious Irish absentees and Protestant persecutors of Catholics. Although this critique represented a massive contemporary condemnation of British colonialism and manifested an impulse among metropolitans to distance themselves from imperial excesses, the benefits of empire were far too substantial to permit any turning away from it, and the moment of sensibility waned.

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Preface

Confronting Empire

During the American crisis between 1763 and 1783, the numerous critics of the British government's coercive policy were prone to ridicule those people who, although largely uninformed about the character and components of the overseas empire, nonetheless blindly supported Administration measures concerning them. Thus, in 1778, an anonymous wag calling himself a West India merchant published, in a series of letters in the *London Evening Post*, an alleged conversation among three members of Parliament. When one inquired of another whether he ever gave himself "the trouble of examining and considering the subject" of taxing the colonies, the second man declared: "Oh yes, that I've done in this case long ago.—I'm quite sartin that we are to tax the *West-Indies*, as well as the *West of England*." "You mean the *North-Americans*, I suppose, Sir?," asked the first man. "Why, you knows," the second answered, "its all the same thing:— *North-America*, *Bingal*, *Virginny*, *Jemaiky*, is all in the *Indies*, only the sea folks that loves to box the compass, calls things North and East and West . . . and that makes it so puzzling to understand and to remember the name, and to know where all these *outlandish Colonies* are."¹ That the British public was content to be uninformed was the recurring complaint of people who had considerable experience living in or dealing with America, of whom John Fothergill, a prominent London Quaker, is a principal example. In a 1780 pamphlet, he remarked at length on the sad effects of this ignorance, which he took to be the principal explanation for "the madness and folly" of Britain's conduct of the American war. "Knowledge of AMERICA," he lamented, was "confined to the Merchants, and Traders chiefly. It was a country talked of, but no people, save those immediately interested in its produce, knew any thing about it."²

¹ *The West India Merchant. Being a Series of Papers Originally Printed under that Signature in the London Evening Post* (London, 1778), 15–17.

² John Fothergill, *An English Freeholder's Address to His Countrymen* (London, 1780), 2. See also Fothergill's earlier remarks along the same lines in *Considerations Relative to the North America Colonies* (London, 1765), 35–36.

If such ignorance actually existed, there was little excuse for it. During the previous three-quarters of a century, between roughly 1710 and the outbreak of the War for Independence, the American colonies had experienced a sustained period of growth and development in terms of every possible measure, including territorial expansion, population growth, and overseas commerce, trading not just with Britain but also with the Caribbean, southern Europe, Ireland, and Africa. Although this steady expansion led to the proliferation of economic treatises touting the colonies as “the principal *Cornucopia* of *Great-Britain’s* Wealth,”³ metropolitan Britons were, by and large, slow to recognize the colonies’ growing economic and strategic importance. Between the mid-1730s and the early 1760s, however, this situation changed dramatically, as metropolitan officials and parliamentary leaders developed a deeper appreciation of the centrality of empire to Britain’s economic well-being, naval power, and international standing, and with that, a growing recognition of the vulnerability of Britain’s overseas settlements to attack from its principal imperial rivals, Spain and France, and the advisability of using state funds to protect them. The wars with Spain and France between 1739 and 1748 especially helped to focus attention upon France’s growing capacity to rival Britain as a colonizing and maritime power and to underline, for metropolitan officials, the limits of metropolitan authority within the colonies. Efforts to shore up that authority began immediately in 1748, and the Seven Years’ War from 1756 to 1763 eventually led to a massive increase in expenditures to support the naval and military forces required to check French expansion in the overseas colonial world from North America and the West Indies east to Bengal. The territories in America and India acquired in that war opened still further possibilities and created new problems for metropolitan involvement in imperial oversight. Thereafter, as P. J. Marshall has noted, a “determination to maintain a proper degree of British authority throughout the empire” and an “acceptance that government overseas might assume new powers and perform new functions” became dominant themes in the government’s approach to empire. The only way to solve the empire’s problems was to strengthen metropolitan control.⁴

Parallel to this growing official engagement with empire was a widening and deepening of public interest in all parts of the British overseas world. Over the past quarter-century, scholars have meticulously documented the expansion of print culture in Britain during the century following the Glorious Revolution and explored the impact of this development upon British domestic public life.⁵ Although it is true, as Philip Lawson pointed out in 1989, that

³ G. B., *The Advantages of the Revolution Illustrated, By a View of the Present State of Great Britain* (London, 1753), 30.

⁴ P. J. Marshall, “Empire and Authority in the Later Eighteenth Century,” republished in idem, *‘A Free though Conquering People’: Eighteenth-Century Britain and Its Empire* (Aldershot, U.K.: Ashgate, 2003), Chapter 2, 116.

⁵ See especially Michael Harris and Alan Lee, eds., *The Press in English Society from the Seventeenth to the Nineteenth Centuries* (Cranbury, N.J.: Associated University Presses, 1986);

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this scholarly literature contained little discussion of the imperial issues “that preoccupied so many contemporary writers in the Hanoverian period,”⁶ several historians since the 1990s have abundantly remedied that deficiency. In her sweeping analysis of the centrality of empire in forging a national body politic after the union of England and Scotland, Linda Colley, in 1992, drew upon and thereby directed attention to a massive body of contemporary published writings about the empire and to the deep engagement with empire that those writings exhibited.⁷

Beginning in the 1730s and increasing exponentially over the next half-century, a wide variety of printed sources – histories, chorographies, economic treatises, political pamphlets, novels, plays, epic poems, sermons, improvement treatises, and magazine and newspaper articles – fed what was obviously a voracious appetite for information about the empire. Moreover, as Kathleen Wilson showed in her densely researched and thoroughly analyzed study of the intrusion of imperial considerations into British domestic political and cultural life, this public interest in empire was by no means confined to London and other major overseas trading centers such as Bristol, Liverpool, and Glasgow, but spread via provincial newspapers, printers, and booksellers over all of Britain.⁸ By the 1750s and 1760s, information about the overseas empire was available to Britons wherever they resided, and the wide extent of the empire, as well as the distinctive character of each of its several parts, was well known to large segments of the metropolitan British population, many of whom were intimately involved with the colonies, whether producing items of export to them, exchanging goods with them, supplying them with labor and capital, processing colonial products, or participating in their defense. At the same time, parliamentary debates revealed on the part of the metropolitan political establishment increasing knowledge of and wider attention to imperial matters.

David Armitage and Eliga H. Gould have also contributed significantly to our understanding of the early modern British engagement with empire. Armitage has elegantly traced the gradual emergence among the politically literate, from the early sixteenth century through the age of Walpole, of an “ideology” of empire that by the 1740s proudly and aggressively depicted it in

Jeremy Black, *The English Press in the Eighteenth Century* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1987); Michael Harris, *London Newspapers in the Age of Walpole: A Study in the Origins of the Modern English Press* (Cranbury, N.J.: Associated University Presses, 1987); Robert Harris, *A Patriot Press: National Politics and the London Press in the 1740s* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993); John Brewer, *Party, Ideology and Popular Politics at the Accession of George III* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976), 139–60.

⁶ Philip Lawson, “‘Arts and Empire Equally Extend’: Tradition, Prejudice and Assumption in the Eighteenth Century Press Coverage of Empire,” *Journal of History and Politics*, 7 (1989): 119.

⁷ Linda Colley, *Britons: Forging the Nation 1707–1837* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992).

⁸ Kathleen Wilson, *The Sense of the People: Politics, Culture, and Imperialism in England, 1715–1785* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995).

contradistinction to the contemporary French and Spanish empires as, in his succinct characterization, “Protestant, commercial, maritime and free.”⁹ In his persuasive effort to explain the widespread popular support for the government’s coercive colonial policies before and during the American War for Independence, Gould has thoroughly explored the extensive literature generated by the debate over the American question. In the process, he has illuminated the importance of empire within metropolitan political culture and the persistent public embrace of empire during the war and after the loss of thirteen American colonies.¹⁰

The central thrust of this literature has been to emphasize the growing metropolitan embrace of overseas empire after the 1730s, and embrace there certainly was. As P. J. Marshall aptly put it in the title of an important essay, late eighteenth-century Britain was to a remarkable extent a “Nation Defined by Empire.”¹¹ This volume has a rather different emphasis. As the title suggests, it considers how metropolitan Britons spoke and wrote about the British Empire during the short eighteenth century, the early decades through the mid-1780s. Neither a history of ideas in the usual sense of that term nor a study of public opinion, it is rather an analysis of the many discourses or languages that metropolitan Britons used to assimilate, characterize, and evaluate the significance of the overseas empire and to debate the nature and dimensions of the myriad problems posed by empire in an era of rapid expansion and contraction after 1760. It uses the principal of those languages as analytic organizing categories.

This project relies primarily on an examination of two kinds of sources. The first are reports of parliamentary speeches; the second are contemporary metropolitan, including Irish, publications about or relating to the overseas portions of the empire. The vastness of such publications might seem to require some principle of selection, but, having never managed to find or invent one during more than a decade of research, I have simply proceeded by working through every relevant source I could find. Nevertheless, the fact that when I go online to check a quotation or a title I occasionally turn up yet another source suggests that I have missed a number of them. Unless they were originally printed somewhere in Britain or republished there, works that originated in America do not form part of the research base for this volume, and newspapers and magazines have been used sparingly and unsystematically.

The volume is very largely an exposition of my own analysis of the primary documents I have collected. References to the vast secondary literature are

⁹ David Armitage, *The Ideological Origins of the British Empire* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000). The quotation is from p. 173.

¹⁰ Eliga H. Gould, *The Persistence of Empire: British Political Culture in the Age of the American Revolution* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000).

¹¹ P. J. Marshall, “A Nation Defined by Empire, 1755–1766,” republished in idem, *A Free though Conquering People*, Chapter 5.

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limited to those works that have most directly informed my understanding of the contexts of the many British debates over eighteenth-century empire. Focusing relentlessly on the public discussion of empire as contributors endeavored to define and debate the successive issues that having an empire raised, the volume deliberately adopts the expositional strategy of letting the contributors to this discussion speak, colorfully and forcefully, in their own words, proceeding on the assumption that authors and speakers in polemical arenas do not normally advance arguments that they think unlikely to persuade their audience. But I have not concerned myself with whether particular analyses of imperial problems were valid, or convincing, or actually won much of an audience, as interesting and important as those questions would be if this book were intended as a study of the battle for public opinion.¹² In the end, my concerns are far more modest: to analyze the ways in which people talked and wrote about empire as they tried to confront its unfolding problems in shifting contexts and to trace the gradual emergence after 1760 of a critique of empire on the grounds of humanity, justice, and liberty. This consciously limited objective has not required an explicit examination of questions of authorial identity, expertise, and intentions; the context and details of print production; or audience response – all important problems that this study implicitly raises and that call for further investigation.¹³

Extending to British behavior in India, America, Africa, and Ireland, this critique of empire was not the product of some general reassessment of empire by a few major analysts systematically applying or endeavoring to develop a coherent, much less uniform, set of principles to evaluate the morality of empire. Rather, it was a loose bundle of separate critiques by quite different and often unrelated groups arising out of attempts to diagnose, understand, and resolve specific problems associated with particular areas of the overseas empire. Earlier scholars have not entirely ignored these critiques. Wilson, Marshall, and Gould have all briefly drawn attention to them,¹⁴ and a few specialized studies have investigated in some detail aspects of debates over specific problems or

¹² For illuminating considerations of these issues as they can be studied for the larger context of British writing, see the works cited in note 5, and, with specific reference to issues involving empire, Wilson, *Sense of the People*.

¹³ Other interesting problems raised but not taken up in this volume also provide opportunities for further investigation. One involves the intellectual genealogy of the participants' ideas, which individual writers occasionally profess to have taken from one or the other of the pantheon of thinkers conventionally studied by historians of political thought. A second is the relationship between debate over empire and partisan politics, which, for instance, was especially important to the deeply partisan consideration of the American and Irish questions. A third is the link between evaluations of empire and the analysis of domestic problems within Britain, and a fourth is the relationship of this specifically British critique to the broader European intellectual context in which it took place.

¹⁴ See Wilson, *Sense of the People*, 274–79; P. J. Marshall, “The Moral Swing to the East: British Humanitarianism, India and the West Indies,” in idem, *A Free though Conquering People*, Chapter 9; and Eliga H. Gould, “Foundations of Empire, 1763–83,” in Sarah Stockwell, ed., *The British Empire: Themes and Perspectives* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2008), 22.

practices.¹⁵ This study, however, is the first to treat this subject comprehensively and in detail and to endeavor to explore and bring out the common elements in these parallel critiques.

Briefly put, the central argument of this volume is that, following several decades of largely uncritical celebration of the empire as a vibrant commercial entity that had made Britain prosperous and powerful, a growing familiarity with the character of overseas territories and their inhabitants during and after the Seven Years' War produced a substantial critique of empire deriving from a widespread and deep revulsion against the behaviors exhibited by many groups of British peoples overseas. Using the languages of humanity and justice as standards for evaluation, critics condemned, in turn, the behaviors of East India Company servants, American slaveholders, Atlantic slave traders, British political and military leaders and strategists during the American War of Independence, abettors of British oppressions in Ireland, including ministerial authorities, placemen, and pensioners, and rapacious Irish absentee and Protestant persecutors of Catholics.

Given the long-standing tendency of Europeans to view the world beyond Europe as a collection of essentially lawless and chaotic zones in which the norms "of European civil society did not apply" and "even British nationals were free to act in ways that the British would have viewed as unacceptable closer to home,"¹⁶ the intensity and scope of this revulsion may at first seem surprising. But it was deeply rooted in a ubiquitous language of alterity or otherness that metropolitans had used since the beginning of overseas expansion to describe – and demean – the participants in that expansion and the societies and polities that they had built in their new habitats, a language that predisposed metropolitans to be antisettler. The continuing use of this language strongly belied the later eighteenth-century metropolitan conception of overseas settlers and traders as "brethren," a concept often employed by the Administration in its efforts to make subjecthood a device for the expansion of metropolitan authority in the overseas empire and subsequently invoked during the American crisis by opponents of coercion and exponents of reconciliation.¹⁷ If the geographical situation of those operating beyond the line of European civility and law partially explained their many violations of metropolitan standards of

¹⁵ Particularly, Nicholas B. Dirks, *The Scandal of Empire: India and the Creation of Imperial Britain* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2006); Tillman W. Nechtman, *Nabobs: Empire and Identity in Eighteenth-Century Britain* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010); Christopher Leslie Brown, *Moral Capital: Foundations of British Abolitionism* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2006); Srividhya Swaminathan, *Debating the Slave Trade: Rhetoric of British National Identity, 1759–1815* (Burlington, Vt.: Ashgate, 2009); and the essays in Kathleen Wilson, ed., *A New Imperial History: Culture, Identity and Modernity in Britain and the Empire 1660–1840* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004).

¹⁶ Gould, "Foundations of Empire, 1763–83," 22. Gould explores this subject at greater length in his influential "Zones of Law, Zones of Violence: The Legal Geography of the British Atlantic, circa 1772," *William and Mary Quarterly*, 3d ser., 60 (2003), 471–510.

¹⁷ For a different perspective, see Stephen Conway, "From Fellow-Nationals to Foreigners: British Perceptions of the Americans, circa 1739–1785," *William and Mary Quarterly*, 3d ser., 59 (2002), 65–101.

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justice and humanity, it certainly did not, for critics of the excesses of empire, excuse them.

Indeed, the continuing application of the language of alterity to participants in the on-site work of empire made it easy for critics to attribute responsibility for the behaviors they found offensive to those participants. In so doing, they defined colonials – settlers and traders – as demonstrably un-British and thereby manifested a powerful drive to distinguish and distance metropolitan Britons from overseas Britons and, in the name of British honor, civility, and humanity, to correct the worst excesses of British overseas colonialism by bringing colonial behaviors into line with metropolitan norms. In the meantime, they suggested that, notwithstanding powerful claims to the contrary by the objects of their scorn, the overseas portion of the British Empire was British only in the sense of being subject to metropolitan Britain and emphatically not because Britons abroad exhibited, much less shared, the same civil and humane values as Britons at home. Eventually, government inaction or ineffective action forced critics to acknowledge the stark facts of Britain's national responsibility for and complicity in each of the various evils they deplored.

In the process of confronting and coming to terms with empire in the wake of the Seven Years' War, metropolitan Britons thus displayed a deep ambivalence about it, at once embracing empire for the benefits that it brought to the home islands and condemning it for its excesses. Neither the critics nor the exponents of empire shared a political affiliation or formed an intellectually coherent group. Many in both categories wrote anonymously, and many were interested only in the problems of a single sphere of imperial activity. What the various critics had in common and what drew them into the national discussion of empire was their sense of shock, that the purportedly civilizing and humanizing tendencies of a great commercial empire could fail to prevent the excesses they detected in so many areas of British overseas activity, excesses they regarded as shameful, potentially embarrassing, and unworthy of a free, liberal, just, and humane people. Moreover, in expressing this sense of disappointment and shock about developments in specific areas, they contributed to the formation and widespread use of a common language that they could all use to identify what they regarded as the undesirable practices and costs of empire. Taken together, the many objections raised by these critics constituted a devastating assessment of the outcome of early modern British colonialism.

My use of the modern term *colonialism* here and in the title of this book is not meant to be polemical. The concept – indeed, the very word “colonialism” – was not part of early modern parlance on empire in Britain or elsewhere, but was invented by modern analysts to refer to and encompass the damaging effects of domination upon subject peoples in the fiduciary empires of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries and has more recently been applied to the expansion of settler societies under the aegis of both empires and nations.¹⁸ I use it here because no other concept fully encapsulates the oppressive features

¹⁸ On this point, see Jack P. Greene, “Colonial History and National History: Reflections on a Continuing Problem,” *William and Mary Quarterly*, 3d ser., 64 (April 2007), 235–50.

of empire as its British critics identified them after 1760 and because I wish to call attention to their recognition of all the components of colonialism a century before the word was coined.¹⁹

The rather sudden emergence of the languages of humanity and justice and their antonyms as central tropes for the discussion and evaluation of empire requires an explanation. Whether or not this emergence was part of the broad Enlightenment disillusionment with empire that Sankar Muthu has studied through the writings of three prominent late eighteenth-century continental philosophers,²⁰ it was to some extent influenced by a deepening penetration of humanistic and liberal ideas and sensibilities into British culture during the eighteenth century. The languages of improvement and civility, along with the associated languages of humanity, justice, and liberty, had of course been around for a long time, exponents of empire having used them from the start in both Ireland and America to conceptualize the colonial project.

But metropolitan analysts rarely applied such ideas to a consideration of the heavy price paid by indigenous peoples caught up in English expansion, and the important question is why not. Certainly, from the late sixteenth century onward, Britons – English and Scots – had openly committed oppressions of the sort conventionally associated with imperial expansion, more often than not with government sanction. In the oversettlement of the Irish plantations, they had managed to dispossess the indigenous Irish of the greater part of their land and, beginning in the 1690s, in an effort to force them to convert to Protestantism, had restricted their economic and educational opportunities, marginalized them socially, emasculated them civilly, and stifled their resistance by military force. In every American colony except Barbados and Jamaica, which had no indigenous peoples left at the time of English occupation, they had inadvertently spread European pathogens among the indigenes, inflicting a devastating mortality on the native inhabitants. The pattern of displacement settlement effectively drove the indigenes from their lands, and the labor systems they devised were characterized by the callous treatment of the laborers, many of whom were indigenous and many more imported. Their constant demand for slaves had contributed to interethnic violence in Africa, led to the capture and transportation of Africans by the thousand to areas of labor deficit in the New World, and condemned those who survived the lethal Atlantic crossing to a grim future with little prospect of regaining their liberty.

No doubt, the victims of these oppressions cried out against them, but few found an opportunity to voice their miseries and misfortunes in Britain. To be sure, by the closing decades of the seventeenth century a few articulate returning visitors, mainly clerics and merchants who had found the treatment of indigenous Americans and Africans in colonial contexts offensive, invoked

¹⁹ Ania Loomba, *Colonialism/Postcolonialism* (London: Routledge, 1998), 1–20, provides a thoughtful and lucid definition.

²⁰ Sankar Muthu, *Enlightenment Against Empire* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003).

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the languages of justice and humanity in their efforts to inform metropolitans about the cruelties and human costs of the slave trade and slave systems that settlers were constructing in the Americas. But they objected, not to slavery per se, but to the excesses in the working, care, and punishing of the enslaved and, principally, to the failure to evangelize them. Such reports served mainly to fortify metropolitan reservations about the English-worthiness of American colonists and the societies they were building overseas and did little to sensitize them to the human and moral costs of empire. Indeed, insofar as they were aware of them, early observers of empire seem to have come to terms rather quickly with what later critics would identify as unacceptable oppressions, regarding them as the unavoidable concomitants of the noble work of building plantations and bringing civility to a raw, untamed, and savage New World and accepting as routine their consequences to indigenous and African peoples.

Several elements probably contributed to this insensitivity. First, for much of the first century of American colonization, the English imperial project was not yet a prominent arena of metropolitan engagement. Second, the Black Legend circulated by English and Dutch writers, with its lurid tales of alleged Spanish atrocities in the conquests of Mexico, Peru, and other areas of the New World, effectively deflected Britons from a close examination of their own behavior overseas. From that perspective, the English imperial project appeared comparatively benign, and metropolitans found it virtually unimaginable that their compatriots should descend to Spanish levels of cruelty and inhumanity. Third, a growing awareness of the economic, maritime, and strategic importance of the American empire in the early eighteenth century tended to focus attention on the benefits for Britons at home and in the colonies rather than upon the costs borne by non-British peoples. Fourth, religious and political animosities and fears growing out of the French and Spanish imperial challenge after 1730 and the wars of 1739 to 1763 further obscured any transgressions of metropolitan principles and standards.

As a result of all these and possibly other factors, the emergence of the languages of justice and humanity beginning in the early 1760s as a standard for the evaluation of British imperial behavior depended on several preconditions other than mere availability. First was the growing recognition from the early 1730s of the economic and strategic importance of the various components of overseas empire to Britain's commercial activities, its domestic economy, and its reliance for defense on naval superiority. Second, as a result of that recognition, was the development of an enhanced government and public interest in the empire in combination with government concern that most areas of the overseas empire could be much better monitored and managed. Third were the territorial acquisitions and consequent expansion of empire in combination with Britain's achievement of naval and military supremacy as a result of the Seven Years' War. Fourth was the Government's newfound confidence, a product of its new international dominance, in its ability to exert greater control over the empire. Fifth was the opening of opportunities for debate and

criticism after 1763 as a result of Britain's ostensible imperial invulnerability. Britain had won the Seven Years' War, but in so doing it had also lost, at least in the short run, the enemies that had certifiably threatened its Protestant religious establishment and its vaunted free constitution. Unconstrained by formidable European opponents, British policymakers were suddenly impelled to try to enhance the economic potential of empire through closer imperial management, and imperial analysts of all persuasions were free to identify and condemn aspects of overseas involvement that violated British standards of humanity and justice.

What gave the languages of humanity and justice their new saliency, however, was their obvious relevance to the analysis and characterization of specific problems arising in the early 1760s with regard to both India and America, problems involving the plunder of India by East India Company servants and the resistance of the American colonies to metropolitan attempts to tax them and regulate their internal affairs. Those problems led to the identification of many specific concerns about the treatment of indigenous people and the moral worth of overseas settlers and Company representatives that quickly evolved into a standard by which long-standing practices and accepted institutions such as the slave trade, chattel slavery, and various Irish problems, as well as subsequent enterprises such as the American war, could be evaluated unfavorably and the legitimacy of the entire imperial project brought under scrutiny and into question. A temporary crisis of confidence as a result of Britain's inability to achieve its objectives in the American war, the withdrawal of thirteen American colonies from the empire, and the loss of Minorca and two colonies to Spain and a third colony to France as a result of military and naval defeats may have contributed to the further expansion of those languages as important elements in the discussion of empire within the larger British world.

In stressing the breadth and depth of the late eighteenth-century critique of empire, however, I do not mean to suggest that the critics carried the day. Scholars such as P. J. Marshall, C. A. Bayly, Eliga H. Gould, and, most recently, Maya Jasanoff, among others, are certainly right in their contention that the British Empire, in the decades after its American losses, emerged stronger than ever and that Britain retained its powerful commitment to empire.²¹ Relatively few of the critics cited in this volume ever hinted that Britain should withdraw or dissociate itself from empire. Rather, most of them shared with advocates of empire an appreciation of the economic and strategic importance of imperial commerce and a commitment to the maintenance of Britain's imperial grandeur. Moreover, aside from the regularization of British

²¹ P. J. Marshall, *The Making and Unmaking of Empires: Britain, India, and America c. 1750–1783* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), and idem, 'A Free though Conquering People': *Eighteenth-Century Britain and Its Empire*; C. A. Bayly, *Imperial Meridian: The British Empire and the World, 1780–1830* (London: Longman, 1989); Gould, *Persistence of Empire*; Maya Jasanoff, *Liberty's Exiles: American Loyalists in the Revolutionary World* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2011).

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administration in India, an accomplishment that fell far short of their demands, critics managed to achieve almost none of their policy objectives until the abolition of the slave trade almost two decades after this study concludes. Too many powerful interest groups were too deeply involved in empire, and empire was too economically and militarily successful and too thoroughly incorporated into Britain's national economic life and identity, to permit any turning away from it.

In this connection, it is also important to note that, as Muthu has cogently observed in reference to "prominent and innovative" political thinkers, the later decades of the eighteenth century were anomalous in their expression of serious reservations about empire. "Strikingly," he writes, "anti-imperialist sentiments," which he distinguishes from antislavery sentiment, "largely fell by the wayside as the eighteenth century came to a close" and as "later thinkers" failed to rally "to the cause of exposing imperial injustices, defending non-European peoples against imperial rule, and attacking the standard rationales for empire." By the middle of the nineteenth century, he concludes, "anti-imperialist thinking was virtually absent from Western European intellectual debates, surfacing only by way of philosophically obscure and politically marginal figures." Such "philosophically obscure" analysts have supplied the bulk of the evidence considered in this volume, but with the notable exception of the slave trade and slavery their influence appears to have had no more staying power than that of the prominent anti-imperial political thinkers Muthu analyzes.²²

That the policy achievements of Britain's critics of empire were limited does not mean that they did not have a profound impact on how Britons spoke and thought about empire. In less than two decades, they managed to persuade a very large proportion of the British public that the slave trade and slavery were unacceptable evils unworthy of a humane and liberal nation, albeit it took them much longer to overcome the powerful opposition of the combined lobby of slave traders and West Indians and get concrete government action. Also importantly, the standard they developed forced subsequent proponents of empire to justify British rule in India and elsewhere in terms not only of economic and strategic considerations, but also of humanity, justice, improvement, and civility. In the short run, Britain, as a government and a nation, persisted in the embrace and celebration of empire, despite having been fully informed between 1764 and the late 1780s about its moral excesses, its suspect legal foundations, and the high costs it continued to exact from its numerous victims. Yet the fact that so many contemporaries were able to identify the destructive effects of colonialism and speak out at such length and with such forcefulness against them calls into serious question the position of modern scholars that to pass judgment on early modern colonialism is to be anachronistic, presentist, and beyond the scope of eighteenth-century sensibilities.

This volume consists of a Prologue, eight chapters, and an Epilogue. The Prologue uses the literature surrounding the Carib War in St. Vincent to introduce

²² Muthu, *Enlightenment Against Empire*, 3–6.

the reader to metropolitan languages of empire and to call attention to the still relatively new use of the languages of humanity and justice to evaluate the behavior of Britons overseas. Constructed largely from my analysis of the growing volume of commercial treatises through the middle decades of the eighteenth century, Chapter 1 focuses on the languages of commerce and liberty as the primary vehicles for the celebration of empire as a principal source of Britain's wealth. The only chapter not built upon a discrete and well-defined body of literature, Chapter 2 uses examples from a wide range of genres to define and illustrate the flip side of the celebratory language of commerce: the language of otherness or alterity that from the beginning of English overseas empire metropolitans had employed to depict colonists as a new kind of other. Chapter 3 draws upon the literature growing out of the successful outcome of the Seven Years' War and the intensive debate over how Britain should respond to American resistance to metropolitan authority between 1764 and 1776 to illustrate the emergence of an old but newly prominent language of imperial grandeur as a principal language for speaking about empire. Throughout the debate over the American question, this was the Government's favorite language, wielded against the Opposition's insistence on describing the empire in the conventional languages of commerce and liberty, while both sides invoked the languages of humanity and justice to challenge the arguments of their opponents.

The next five chapters show how the languages of humanity and justice operated in a variety of settings to throw light on the undesirable by-products of empire. Chapter 4 treats the earliest extended use of those languages as markers for opposing the excesses of overseas empire during the debate, beginning in the mid-1760s and continuing for the next two decades, over the alleged plunder of India by East India Company servants. Chapter 5 describes how from the late 1760s some metropolitans, stimulated by the glaring contradiction between colonial claims to liberty and their enslaved labor forces and by a nascent antislavery movement, began to apply the same language to American slave owners and the societies in which they were predominant and eventually to African slave traders in the Atlantic and Britain. Chapter 6 considers how the continuing disagreements over the relative importance of the languages of imperial grandeur, on the one hand, and of commerce and liberty, on the other, shaped attitudes toward empire and war during the American War for Independence and the ways in which opposing sides used the languages of humanity and justice to score points against one another. Chapter 7 shifts the focus to Ireland, where long-standing Protestant Irish complaints about British commercial and political oppressions resurfaced during the American war and where from the perspective of the Quebec Act in 1774 the extent of Protestant discrimination against Catholics in Ireland, long represented by Irish Catholics as oppressive and inhumane, suddenly also became a subject of concern for metropolitan observers, who coupled that concern with an earlier condemnation of the Anglo-Irish regime for its irresponsible absenteeism and the corruption evident in its extensive pension list to bring that particular

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colonial regime under serious scrutiny. Chapter 8 explores British efforts to come to terms with the loss of thirteen of the American colonies and the continuing excesses of empire in India, Africa, the remaining American colonies, and Ireland in the decade after 1783. The Epilogue analyzes contemporary assessments of the costs and benefits of empire during the closing decades of the eighteenth century.

This book has been long in the making. My early career in studying the formation of colonial British America and the American Revolution made me thoroughly aware of some aspects of the underside of British imperial history in the early modern era, albeit my orientation then could be taken as little more than a protest against the effort to define the British imperial situation from the perspective of the metropolitan center. But my engagement from the late 1960s to the late 1980s with an Atlantic history initiative that laid heavy emphasis upon Caribbean, South American, and African engagement with the Atlantic world beginning in the fifteenth century profoundly impressed upon me the devastating effects upon native peoples and imported laborers of the colonial process throughout the Atlantic world, effects that called into question the self-celebrating attitude that colonial settlers took toward the expansion of Europe overseas and revealed that the colonial adventurers and settlers I wrote about were on the cutting edge of that devastation and the principal agents of it. In the late 1980s, during a planning session for some quinquennial celebration of Columbus's encounter with America, the late Wilcomb Washburn, in response to my suggestion that the costs as well as the benefits of that encounter needed to be considered and my mention of some Spanish examples to illustrate my point, accused me of still believing in the Black Legend. My quick reply that my only problem with the Black Legend was its being limited to the Spanish expressed my long-standing conviction that every expansionist early modern European power had its own record of injustice and inhumanity to account for and that the imperial and national narratives subsequently developed to celebrate – and excuse – the accomplishments of those who spearheaded the cultural transformation of so much of the world in pursuit of their expansionist aims have obscured the high price paid by those who lost their lands, lives, independence, and cultures in the process and, at the same time, helped those entities – empires and nations – to disguise from subsequent generations the shaky moral foundations on which they stand.

Although in a general way this book is an outgrowth of my engagement with Atlantic history, my interest in the specific subject it covers directly derives from an invitation by P. J. Marshall to contribute a chapter on imperial identity to a volume he was organizing on the eighteenth-century British Empire. This assignment took me into the realm of contemporary literature in which people articulated what it meant to be British and how empire affected British identity. Within this literature I found a significant pool of material by writers who, far from celebrating British imperial achievements, were appalled by the injustices and inhumanities that agents of empire had committed in pursuit of

them – in India, in Africa, in the West Indies and North America, and in Ireland. Space limitations prevented me from pursuing this discovery at length in the chapter I wrote for Marshall's book. But when the History Department at the University of Western Ontario asked me to give the Joanne Goodman Lectures, I immediately thought of returning to this subject.

On October 24–26, 2000, I delivered three lectures under the title “Speaking of Empire: Celebration and Disquiet in Metropolitan Analyses of the Eighteenth-Century British Empire.” Two of these lectures were early versions of Chapters 4 and 5, and the third was a greatly compressed combination of Chapters 1, 2, and 3. I presented a later version of Chapter 5 as a paper entitled “Creole Despotism: The Humanitarian Critique of Slaveholders, and the Reassessment of Empire in Metropolitan Britain during the Eighteenth Century” at the Fifth Annual Conference of the Illinois Program for Research in the Humanities, University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign, on April 5, 2003, and at the Department of History, University of Texas, Austin, on November 11, 2004, and Chapter 4 as a paper entitled “Arenas of Asiatic Plunder” at the Workshop on Early American History, University of Georgia, Athens, on August 22, 2003. I revised Chapter 3 and wrote the early drafts of Chapters 6 and 7 while I had a residency fellowship at the Rockefeller Foundation's Bellagio Conference and Study Center, in Bellagio, Italy, in August 2006, and I wrote Chapter 2 and revised much of the rest of the manuscript while I was a Fellow of the National Humanities Center during the academic year 2009–10.

Although most of the research was done at the John Carter Brown Library in Providence, Rhode Island, the British Library in London, and the Royal Irish Society Library in Dublin, several of my research assistants at Johns Hopkins University, including James Allegro, Ellen Holmes Pearson, Paul Tonks, Catheine Cardno, and Jessica Roney, have helped me gather material, as did my former student R. S. T. Stoermer. Maurice Bric, P. J. Marshall, Eliga H. Gould, Catherine Molineux, Peter S. Onuf, Alan Tully, Karin Wulf, Craig Yirush, and Nuala Zahedieh provided useful advice, as did two anonymous readers for Cambridge University Press. Brooke Newman offered a helpful critical reading of Chapter 5, and Eliga H. Gould of Chapters 3 and 6 and the Epilogue. Neil York generously read the entire manuscript and made many excellent suggestions for its improvement. Russell Hahn did yeoman work copyediting this substantial manuscript. I am grateful to all of these people and institutions and extend my special thanks to Professor Ian K. Steele, my principal host at the University of Western Ontario, and to my spouse, Amy Turner Bushnell, who read and criticized the manuscript at every stage and whose extraordinary copyediting skills greatly improved my text.

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