

The Absent-Minded Imperialists: Empire, Society and Culture in Britain. By Bernard Porter. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004; pp. xxii + 497, 8 pp. plates. Hb. £25; Pb. £14.99).

Bernard Porter's choice of title for his recent monograph is provocative and well-considered, albeit not fully convincing. Much the same could be said of the engaging book that follows. In 1883 Sir John Seeley wrote that Britain had developed its remarkable Empire in 'a fit of absence of mind'. Motivated by alarm at his countrymen's perceived lack of interest in imperial affairs, the Cambridge professor published his famous series of lectures, the *Expansion of England*. These called for Britain to greatly expand and tighten the bonds between itself and the nascent colonies. This work became a Late-Victorian bestseller, eventually selling over half a million copies, and providing inspiration for prominent imperialist politicians such as Joseph Chamberlain and Leo Amery.¹

Much of the debate around the impact of the Empire on British society revolves around assessing the popular reaction to Seeley and the imperial propagandists who followed him. In recent years historians such as John Mackenzie and Andrew Thompson have tended to argue that British culture and politics became deeply permeated by the Empire. Popular entertainments and educational activities were awash with imperial references, particularly in the early decades of the Twentieth Century.² Bernard Porter provides a vivid dissenting voice. For him, the day-to-day influence of the Empire on British society has been significantly exaggerated by recent scholarship. Amongst the vast working-classes in particular, there was widespread ignorance of the geography and composition of the Empire's constituent parts. The attempts of propagandists, such as Buchan and Milner, to create an 'imperial consciousness' had ephemeral success at best, and often fell on deaf ears. For Porter 'most classes of Briton had little sympathetic contact with the Empire. Their lifestyles and alternative discourses alienated them from it'.³

Porter is far from the first to reach such conclusions, but his synthesis is distinguished by the impressive breadth of its research. The extensive bibliography provides a great boon to the researcher, listing a plethora of printed ephemera and biographies, many of which will be unfamiliar to the non-specialist. Moreover, Porter manages to provide a wide-ranging critique of popular methods employed to construct histories of the imperial experience. He is particularly convincing in his analysis of Edward Said, author of the seminal *Orientalism*, and his followers. Porter effectively demonstrates that cultural historians have often exaggerated the value and significance of allusions to the Empire in British art and literature. Moreover, their interpretations have at times owed more to current value systems than an accurate understanding of the cultural frameworks of the

original audience. The analysis is presented with a refreshingly dry sense of humour and a healthy disregard for the politically correct convictions earnestly upheld by some of his peers.⁴

The main body of Porter's analysis convincingly argues that there was no such thing as a unitary British cultural experience of the Empire. Separate chapters are devoted to the working-classes, the various strands of the middle-class and the aristocracy. The Edwardian and inter-war periods also receive detailed coverage in their own chapters. Porter effectively portrays Britain as a complex and divided society, where experiences of Empire were deeply affected by religion, trade and especially class. Whereas members of the upper-classes may well have had substantial first-hand experience of the colonies and Dominions, some workers in the 1920s still thought that California raisins were an Empire product!

It must be acknowledged that Porter's work provides a substantial contribution to ongoing debates about the impact of the Empire on British life. Porter is highly effective in demonstrating problems in the methods of respected historians such as John Mackenzie. The 'Studies in Imperialism' series, which he has edited for the Manchester University Press has deeply influenced portrayals of British imperial culture.⁵ The scholarship of Mackenzie and his followers has suggested that great efforts were made to propagate a closer Empire, through marketing campaigns, cinema and the activities of various pressure groups. However, there has been relatively little attention given to how such propaganda was actually received by the public.⁶ As Porter notes, many people attended imperial films and exhibitions for entertainment and curiosity, rather than high-minded ideals. Their participation in imperially-themed activities cannot be assumed to demonstrate a sustained commitment to Empire.

Nevertheless, it could be argued that Porter exaggerates the lack of impact of the Empire on British society, at least in the early decades of the Twentieth Century. Recent research on this period provides greater credence to the views of Mackenzie and his supporters.⁷ Paul Readman, for example, has recently used printed ephemera and newspaper sources to reassess the 1900 election. He demonstrates that jingoistic imperial sentiment, effectively orchestrated by Joseph Chamberlain, provided a cornerstone for the Unionists' victory.⁸ Alex Windscheffel's forthcoming monograph on Late-Victorian Conservatism in London highlights the Unionists' ability to develop a network of support through celebrations of the capital as the 'heart of the Empire'.⁹ The activities of the various Tariff Reform organizations, which came into being after 1903, further demonstrate how a significant political constituency could be based around Empire development. Joseph Chamberlain's attempts to introduce a system of preferential imperial tariffs provided the apogee of campaigns to place the Empire at the heart of

Britain's future economic development and identity. Grassroots activities were particularly potent in the Midlands and the south, with many Unionist activists joining the Tariff Reform League and kindred groups, sometimes at the expense of existing party organisations.¹⁰ Significantly, it was often local branches that took the lead in moulding the TRL's identity through creating plays, patriotic songs, and Empire related festivities. These activists were far from being the passive recipients of imperial propaganda directed from party elites. At its late Edwardian peak, the TRL had a paper membership of perhaps 200,000 members.¹¹ Chamberlain's followers met with a hostile reception in many areas, particularly in industrial northern cities. Free Trade was not overthrown until the nadir of the Great Depression, in 1932. Nevertheless, Chamberlainite politics had a potent influence on popular Conservatism, which lingered into the inter-war period.¹²

Porter should be credited with highlighting the flaws of much of the recent historiography of 'Imperial Britain'. Yet, in balance, it still seems apparent that the Empire had a major day-to-day influence on the island's culture and politics. Porter's book assesses Britain during the period between 1800 and 1940, when the country was undergoing rapid social transformation. It stands to reason that the way Britons portrayed and thought about their Empire differed sharply over time and between the regions.¹³ What is needed in future scholarship is a greater appreciation of these trends, and a clearer understanding of how Britain compared to other societies, in evaluating and portraying its imperial status, during the colonial era.¹⁴

Lady Margaret Hall, Oxford

DAVID THACKERAY

NOTES:

¹ D. Wormell, *Sir John Seeley and the Uses of History* (Cambridge: CUP, 1980), p. 154.

² For an introduction to this scholarship see J.M. MacKenzie, 'The popular culture of Empire in Britain', in J.M. Brown and Wm. Roger Louis (eds.), *The Oxford History of the British Empire, IV: The Twentieth Century* (Oxford: OUP, 1999), pp. 212–31; A.S. Thompson, *Imperial Britain: The Empire in British politics, c.1880–1932* (Harlow: Longmans, 2000)

³ B. Porter, *The Absent-minded Imperialists: Empire, Society and Culture in Britain* (Oxford: OUP, 2004), p.164

⁴ John Mackenzie provides a more detailed critique of Said in his excellent *Orientalism: History, Theory and Arts* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1995).

⁵ See for example J.M. MacKenzie (ed.), *Imperialism and Popular Culture* (Manchester: MUP, 1986), and *Popular Imperialism and the Military, 1850–1950* (Manchester: MUP, 1992).

⁶ For a useful discussion of this point see A.S. Thompson, 'Is Humpty Dumpty Together Again? Imperial History and the *Oxford History of the British Empire*', *Twentieth Century British History*, 12:4, (2001), pp. 511–27, at p. 523.

⁷ See for example J. Bush, *Edwardian Ladies and Imperial Power*, (Leicester: Leicester University Press, 2000); J. Ruger, *The Celebration of the Fleet in Britain and Germany, 1897–1914* (Phd thesis, University of Cambridge, 2003); A.S. Thompson, *The Empire Strikes Back? The impact of Imperialism on Britain from the Mid-Nineteenth Century* (Harlow: Longman, 2005). The latter synthesis provides a useful counter-argument to the Porter thesis.

⁸ P.A. Readman, 'The Conservative Party, Patriotism and British Politics: The Case of the General Election of 1900', *Journal of British Studies*, 40: 1, (2001), pp. 107–45.

⁹ A. Windscheffel, *Popular Conservatism in Imperial London, 1868–1906* (Woodbridge: Boydell & Brewer, 2007).

¹⁰ The Primrose League, which had been the most popular right-wing political organization of the Late-Victorian period, suffered from activists' defections to the Tariff Reform League. P. Vervaecke, *Dieu, la Couronne et L'Empire la Primrose League, 1883–2000: Culture et pratiques politiques d'un mouvement conservateur*, (PhD thesis, University of Lille, 2003), pp. 183–288.

¹¹ D.A. Thackeray, 'The Crisis of the Tariff Reform League and the Division of "Radical Conservatism", c. 1913–1922', *History*, 91:1, (2006), pp. 45–61 and 'The Primrose and the Orchid: Unionist identities in Edwardian Britain', (Forthcoming paper).

¹² The Women's Unionist and Tariff Reform Association, for example, provided the basis and much of the early leadership of the post-1918 female section of the Conservative Party; Edwardian patriotic groups were often characterized by an emphasis on local branch activities. It should be noted that the 1920s was characterized by a more centralized form of organization and propaganda amongst patriotic leagues. S. Anthony, 'The Role of the Empire Marketing Board in the Development of "background publicity"' (Unpublished MS, 2005).

¹³ Jon Lawrence has recently demonstrated that the language and presentation of British public politics differed significantly in the years before and after the Great War. See 'The transformation of British public politics after the First World War', *Past and Present*, 190 (2006), pp. 185–216.

¹⁴ German imperial culture has a particularly well developed historiography but has received little attention from recent scholars of the British Empire. For an introduction to this subject see M. Jefferies, *Imperial Culture in Germany, 1871–1918* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 2003); G. Eley, *Reshaping the German Right: Radical Nationalism and Political Change after Bismarck* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1980) remains the best English-language synthesis; Historians of female patriotic leagues have also begun to compare their imperial leagues with those of Britain. K. Pickles, 'A Link in "The Great Chain of Empire Friendship": The Victoria League in New Zealand', *Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History*, 33:1 (2005), pp. 29–50, provides a good bibliography of recent Australasian scholarship on this subject.