

Organized Patriotism and the Crucible of War: Popular Imperialism in Britain, 1914-1932

Review Number: 1623

Publish date: Thursday, 17 July, 2014

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ISBN: 9780773539617

Date of Publication: 2012

Price: £66.00

Pages: 376pp.

Publisher: McGill-Queen's University Press

Publisher url: http://www.mqup.ca/organized-patriotism-and-the-crucible-of-war-products-9780773539617.php?page_id=73&

Place of Publication: Montreal

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Matthew Hendley's *Organized Patriotism* examines the ways in which three 'patriotic and imperialist leagues' coped with the impact of the First World War. Focusing on the 'politically and socially acceptable' National Service League, League of the Empire and Victoria League (p. 7), he considers why some organizations fared better than others, ultimately suggesting that a diverse membership, flexible operations and 'kindler, gentler' and 'domesticated' characterisations of empire were the keys to some groups' resilience. The book provides valuable information on the administrative development and creative output of the three leagues during the war, yet a number of undefined terms and nagging doubts about the wider significance of these organizations for wartime and post-war politics, society and culture remain, inhibiting its effectiveness to some extent.

The book is divided into four large main chapters – one each focusing on the wartime work of the three leagues and a final chapter exploring the post-war work of the League of Empire and Victoria League to the early 1930s. Chapter one explores the demise of the National Service League (NSL), which went into abeyance in 1917 and never resumed business. Hendley charts the NSL's progress over the war's first three years, maintaining that its pre-war reputation and success was vested largely in the figure of Lord Roberts. Notwithstanding his 'ossified opinions on subjects such as autonomy within the Empire and the place of British women in society' (p. 14), Roberts remained popular, even if he pursued the NSL's agenda less vigorously than he had before the war. The combination of Roberts' death in late 1914 and the introduction of conscription in 1916 rendered the NSL obsolete, despite the active leadership of the influential political figures Lord Milner and Lord Curzon. As an organisation committed to a single primary issue – the establishment of conscription as a permanent part of British society – Hendley suggests the NSL was ill-equipped to continue activities once that topic was withdrawn. Early in the war, the NSL generally avoided embarrassing the government by continuing to press for conscription. Most such calls in the press and journals in 1915 were issued by people who were not NSL members, though in the discussion of these arguments it is not always clear whether the authors cited were or were not members. Some members, such as T. C. Horsfall, certainly did continue to press for conscription; Hendley even suggests 'Horsfall's work must be unique in First World War patriotic pamphlets in quoting Germans sympathetically' in pressing his

case (p. 29), though this claim overlooks the frequent positive quotation of ‘good Germans’ which Stuart Wallace and John Ramsden, among others, have previously noted.

The NSL’s main problem, for Hendley, was its inability to broaden either its membership or its activities in the face of the organisation’s nullification. Proposals to promote the employment of women to replace enlisted men were vetoed, while attempts to merge with the more moderate Royal Colonial Institute (RCI) in 1915 and 1916 foundered on the issue of women’s membership, where the RCI showed itself even less progressive than the far from enthusiastic NSL. Despite Milner’s association with ‘patriotic labour’, the NSL also struggled to attract any substantial elements of the British labour movement, though when the NSL finally abandoned operations, some members found their way into the ranks of the ‘patriotic labour’ British Workers’ League. Attempts to find new roles in philanthropic organisation or representing veterans’ interests indicated an increasing desperation to maintain relevance and proved to be ‘perfunctory and undistinguished’ because of a lack of previous experience in areas besides conscription agitation (p. 63). For Hendley, the NSL’s pre-war political partisanship, reluctance to embrace or encourage women’s activism, and singular focus made it redundant and unable to revive itself. Essentially, the NSL serves as Hendley’s example of how not to react to the ‘crucible’ of the First World War. At times, the discussion arguably casts the NSL as a pantomime villain, conspicuously failing in its schemes thanks to flaws evident to everyone but itself.

Chapter two performs a similar dissection of the League of Empire’s (LOE) wartime performance. While the LOE also had a primary focus on one task – promoting imperial education – it proved more adept at expanding its scope of operations during the war. As with the NSL, Hendley spends considerable time in explaining the LOE’s pre-war organisation, noting the substantial influence of academics, and the organisation talents of ‘Mrs Ord Marshall’, a female imperialist unusual for her relatively humble background. Hendley has a slightly curious habit of referring to many of the women involved in the organizations discussed either solely by their title and surname or by their husband’s first name, presumably echoing the labels applied in the various organizations’ files. This becomes rather distracting, in places: to find a woman as noted and readily traceable in historical records as Ethel Snowden described as ‘Mrs Philip Snowden’, as if her work and achievements resulted from her Labour MP husband and not her own endeavours, offers little hope for detailed exploration of less prominent women. Though Hendley certainly emphasises the important roles women played in the success of the LOE (and the Victoria League), his declared intention to provide an analysis ‘informed by gender history’ (p. 6) sometimes appears a rather reductive version of a much more complex approach.

The LOE, according to Hendley, ‘held a unique position’ (p. 82), both non-partisan but, by virtue of its efforts to organisation imperial education conferences, in close touch with government representatives. While the war caused a hiatus in such work, the LOE found ways to vary its work and maintain its relevance, unlike the NSL. Hendley’s tone in describing the LOE is noticeably more positive. Failed wartime ventures like its unattainable ‘Imperial Studies’ project were signs of ambition and confidence, not the desperation supposedly characteristic of the NSL. In places it is difficult to assess Hendley’s judgement of LOE attitudes – while his extended paraphrasing of A. F. Pollard’s pre-war textbook on the empire summarises the author’s overall emphases, for example, it gives little sense of the language and tone used by Pollard. Nonetheless, his evocation of the LOE’s diversification into other areas such as philanthropy and imperial hospitality effectively demonstrates the ability for flexible organizations to remain meaningful despite the war’s constraints. Hendley also argues that the LOE’s involvement in ‘feminine’ philanthropic tasks allowed it to provide suitable wartime work for its female members, and was part of a larger, successful attempt at ‘maintaining morale and continuity’ (p. 100). Finally, the chapter contends that the avoidance of advocating ‘patriotic indoctrination’ in education (p. 110) or undertaking ‘overt propaganda’ for empire (p. 114) left the LOE in a healthy post-war position, untainted by association with activities that quite rapidly became discredited in the post-war world.

Chapter three focuses on what Hendley considers the model of a successful wartime and post-war organization, the Victoria League (VL). Hendley identifies two important factors in the VL’s vitality: the

substantial number of women who were pre-war members meant it could operate with strength during the war, while its interests in imperial education and hospitality allowed it to stick to 'safe and anodyne discussion' of empire (p. 116), avoiding matters of political controversy that might offend sections of public opinion. Throughout the war the VL carefully avoided connecting itself with the work of other organizations that might damage its non-partisan reputation. Guided by its leading lights, Lady Jersey and Edward Cook, the VL spent the war continuing its established function of welcoming imperial visitors to London, setting up several new hospitality clubs. Hendley suggests the VL avoided philanthropic activities that might affect ordinary people's employment, seeking instead to fill gaps in existing provision that fell within their remit of promoting imperial friendship and unity. Pursuing this goal also involved substantial publicity efforts by the VL. Here, it was surprising to find so little said about Cook's other wartime role, as a leading figure in the Press Bureau, responsible for the oversight and censorship of wartime press material. It might be expected that Cook's dual role permitted cooperation or collusion with official circles in the production of publicity, but this possibility is not apparently explored. If nothing else, the involvement of Cook must have helped to ensure the VL's content met the expectations of the wartime Censor.

Hendley notes that part of the VL's popularity lay in its willingness to provide lectures and publications focusing on things other than the war. In an intellectual climate of wartime necessity, where activities unconnected to the war effort were initially frowned upon, organizations offering some sort of diversion were doubtless welcome, and Hendley usefully illustrates the desired continuation of 'ordinary' life. However, the VL also dealt extensively with wartime issues – Hendley notes that it organized around 300 meetings in the six months from September 1914 to March 1915. While not as extensive as the activities of some official organizations (the work of which Hendley might have addressed at greater depth), this was certainly a substantial effort. The VL also issued over 20 pamphlets in the first half of the war which, Hendley suggests, made the VL 'unique' among its rivals, giving it 'a recognition and authority unmatched by the other patriotic organizations' he explores (p. 164). These pamphlets, produced by authors with varying political connections, ranged broadly over wartime and imperial issues, including areas of public dissatisfaction, and Hendley suggests that 'this mixed patriotic message was not attempted in wartime by other more partisan patriotic organizations' (p. 164). He spends considerable time on the content of these pamphlets, distinguishing them from those produced by other groups like the Central Committee for National Patriotic Organizations or the 'officially unofficial' parliamentary organization, the National War Aims Committee (NWAC). However, many of the rhetorical strands he describes chime with the NWAC's propaganda content, while the non-partisan approach taken by the VL was also vigorously pursued by the cross-party NWAC. Hendley's discussion seems like a missed opportunity to chart the VL's influence over later propaganda. Did the VL's apparently popular approach influence the government-linked NWAC? Some themes suggest it did, but this group's creative output is written off early on (and inaccurately) as 'narrowly focused on war weariness' (p. 152); further connections are not explored despite M. L. Sanders and Philip M. Taylor's establishment in the 1980s of the VL's role as an early unofficial propagandist in place of official provision.

Hendley concludes his third chapter by emphasising the flexibility of the VL's approach. By avoiding partisan controversy or militaristic or aggressive interpretations of empire, the VL allowed diverse groups to embrace its celebration of empire without committing itself to any single vision of imperial development. These points are continued into chapter four, where Hendley traces the continuation of LOE and VL activities during the 1920s. Briefly summarised, he contends that these organizations provided a 'domesticated' form of imperialism focused on celebrating and facilitating links between Britain and its imperial possessions. Both organizations continued to try to increase understanding through education, through the organization of teacher exchanges and imperial education conferences by the LOE and through the VL's hosting of imperial students (including non-Dominion and non-white students, beginning with Malay students in London) and the provision of further publications and public lectures emphasising the benefits of empire. Both groups stressed the idea of an imperial family and highlighted the natural wonders and beauty available to Britons through their empire, while the VL's 'Settler's Welcome' schemes for arriving imperial migrants and assistance of emigration to places like Australia, like the LOE's ambitions for

increasing knowledge of Britain around the empire and of the empire within Britain through teacher exchanges, aimed at ‘domesticating’ the empire for audiences on both sides of the relationship.

Hendley’s account of these post-war activities demonstrates their continuing presence in post-war British society, though questions remain about the scale and significance of such work. Organizing around 2,600 public lectures in 12 post-war years, as the VL did (p. 209), shows a continued ability to subsidise its imperial vision, but the scale of this, like the acknowledged post-war ‘pale echo of the Victoria League’s wartime pamphlet efforts’ (p. 207) arguably suggests the declining rather than continuing relevance of the VL. Its wartime efforts, in turn, had been a ‘pale echo’ of those funded by the government. The one million pamphlets voluntarily distributed by the VL during the war may be compared to the 100 million publications W. H. Smith & Sons was thanked by the NWAC for distributing. One criticism of this book is that it is hard to grasp the significance and scale of the activities undertaken by the organizations he discusses, except compared to each other. If readers have existing knowledge of other organizations serving similar purposes (as I had, in relation to the NWAC), they can draw their own conclusions about the relative impact of the organizations covered in the book, compared to those with which they are more familiar. Hendley’s explanation of the survival of the LOE and VL, based on flexible ideas and openness to a wide membership, particularly of women, is compelling, but feels incomplete without some wider and more consistent comparison with other organizations. While he admits that neither the LOE nor the VL ever became mass organizations, there is little sense of where they stand in comparison to the size, popularity or impact of other groups of the time. In places, the large chapters led to somewhat repetitious passages, returning to discussion that had apparently been concluded, and these words, together with some of the extended biographical information about the organizations’ personnel, might have been better spent in such broader comparisons.

My other main criticism of this deeply-researched and richly-sourced book is that, though both ‘patriotism’ and ‘imperialism’ feature in its title, Hendley makes no attempt to define his understanding of those terms. Presumably, this partly reflects his point that the successful organizations avoided too narrow a definition, but some sort of definitional framework seems appropriate for terms with so many potential interpretations, not only by historical figures, but by historians. Brock Millman, for example, says ‘a “patriot” in wartime Britain was someone willing to employ violence on the home front to silence dissent and maintain national cohesion’.⁽¹⁾ By contrast, Paul Ward describes ‘radical patriotism’ as ‘the political uses to which love of country was put by those who did not simply accept government/state as being synonymous with the nation’.⁽²⁾ In a more recent publication (which Hendley could not be expected to have read before his own book was published), Catriona Pennell suggests that ‘[f]or those men who enlisted because of patriotism, it should be noted that ‘love of country’ was not a form of national hysteria or jingoism. It was a considered, reflective sense of obligation ... [usually] motivated by a sense of well-considered duty and necessity’.⁽³⁾ These are three of several ways that contemporary historians define British patriotism during the First World War, but Hendley does not, as far as I noticed, provide his own definition, or alternatively make clear (for instance) that he considers ‘patriotism’ to be an attitude defined by each individual according to their own circumstances and prejudices. While he does spend some time explaining what the Victoria League, in particular, thought imperialism meant, a clearer sense of his own perspective on such loaded terms as ‘patriotism’ and ‘imperialism’ would have helped me to engage with his arguments.

Matthew Hendley has written a valuable book, providing considerable detailed discussion of the administration, activities and rhetorical content of three ‘patriotic and imperialist’ organizations. How these insights fit into the wider picture of wartime and post-war Britain, however, remains to be discussed.

Notes

1. Brock Millman, *Managing Domestic Dissent in First World War Britain* (London, 2000), p. 99.[Back to \(1\)](#)
2. Paul Ward, *Red Flag and Union Jack: Englishness, Patriotism and the British Left, 1881–1924* (Woodbridge, Suffolk, 1998), p. 4.[Back to \(2\)](#)

3. Catriona Pennell, *A Kingdom United: Popular Responses to the Outbreak of the First World War in Britain and Ireland* (Oxford, 2012), p. 159.[Back to \(3\)](#)
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