The Empire Strikes Back? The Impact of Imperialism on Britain from the Mid-Nineteenth Century

The question mark in the book's title is the first indication of the caution which characterises Andrew Thompson's investigation of the impact of empire and imperialism on Britain. Indeed, questions – both rhetorical and open-ended – are a frequent feature of the text: either as a means of introduction to a section or chapter, or as part of a tentative summation at the end of a given sequence. Throughout, Thompson is at great pains to resist jumping to conclusions which, on the basis of the evidence available, simply cannot be justified. The patient accumulation of detailed analyses of documents gradually acquires its own compelling logic and considerable force of conviction. In other words, and notwithstanding the evident discomfort, at times, of forcing himself not to commit, this is no mere fence-sitting exercise on the part of the author. Andrew Thompson's point is clearly that the habit of forming impressions or authorising a synthesis – however speculative – on the strength of what is often limited material, is a tendency which must be held firmly in check: 'the evidence does not point us in a definite direction' (p. 87), is a remark made in the context of the Wembley exhibition of 1924, but is indicative of the stance taken up in respect of a majority of the contexts looked at. Those contexts are numerous. Indeed, rather than perching on a barrier of any kind, one of the most striking aspects of The Empire Strikes Back is the sense in which the book removes the barriers between the various facets of imperial history, sketching out, albeit in a studiously modest way, what might be the premise of, as it were, a Gesamtgeschichte of the empire, a painstakingly non-forensic reading of the sometimes confusing traces left in the sand by the slow ebb of the imperial tide.

Readers familiar with Imperial Britain: The Empire in British Politics c.1880–1932 (Harlow, 2000), will recognise Andrew Thompson's main thesis here, but will also appreciate the extent to which he is now applying his approach to a much broader range of historical evidence and in a much more nuanced way. Whereas Imperial Britain had argued the case specifically for the political impact of empire over a relatively short period – a theme to which the author returns in chapter 7 of this latest study – The Empire Strikes Back seeks, 'to re-situate the empire in a reading of modern Britain's political culture, social development and economic performance' (p. 239). In a sense, it is the economic dimension which provides the placebo in Thompson's series of tests to measure the impact of empire on the metropolis. Economics is an aspect which historians of empire have traditionally explored in some detail and where they have tended to show that the empire had little effect on the British economy. Andrew Thompson also finds that the empire did indeed play a fairly limited role: 'Britain's economic position', he writes, 'was neither substantially improved nor materially weakened by the possession of an overseas empire'. But he then adds that 'the mistake has been to
apply the same framework of analysis to the empire's effects on British society and politics’ (p. 156). The argument of the book taken all round constitutes an attempt to correct this flawed approach and to emphasise the very complex and often positive impact of the empire. To that extent, the presentation of the neutrality of the economic data might well have served as a useful starting point, against which to set the investigation of the empire's impact on British politics and society.

The book is divided into nine chapters. The first five deal with the impact of the empire on the lives of the British population according to social class (chapters 1–4) and from the specific point of view of women and children (chapter 5). The social bias then gives way, in the four remaining chapters, to questions of – in turn – politics, economics and national identity, with the final sequence being devoted to the 'after-effects' of empire: in relation to Britain's international role, to immigration or Britain's multi-ethnic society, and to wider questions of public policy. Each chapter sets out its stall clearly – often proceeding by way of detailed case studies – and analyses material from an impressive range of archives and printed sources, in order to point up the essentially plural nature of the perception and impact of the empire in Britain. The symbiosis between imperialism and the British aristocracy, for example, is shown to be far less important, in both economic and social terms, than 'declinist' accounts would have us believe: certainly Thompson shows clearly that the empire could not alone have sustained the aristocracy. The professional middle classes, Thompson argues, had a much more productive relationship with the empire as a source of income and status, so that their identity as a social group became closely intertwined with the empire, not least for those of a scientific bent: engineers, geologists, anthropologists, entomologists, journalists, doctors, nurses, and so on. Indeed, it becomes clearer, especially as Thompson unpicks the details of the Indian Civil Service, for example, how empire contributed to an expansion of the state and how the burgeoning bureaucratic class which that expansion produced necessarily had a stake in empire.

Both the aristocracy and the professional classes, notwithstanding the complexity of their relationship with empire, and given their relatively small numbers, maintain a certain coherence of attitude. The same cannot be said of the entrepreneurial middle class and still less of the lower middle class or the working class. Although that is only logical, given the size of the social categories which Thompson is surveying here, he nonetheless provides a convincing explanation for the variations in attitudes towards the empire as something more than a function of absolute numbers: 'different groups of working people were exposed to the empire in different ways, and […] its meaning and popularity varied accordingly (p. 40). The lower middle class by no means bought into the imperial idea or practice in any monolithic way, though those that did, Thompson shows, did so sometimes in a particularly vehement fashion.

As for the working class, he is surely right to suggest that their relationship with the empire was more 'autonomous' or mature than some historians, who explore the notion of social control of the lower orders, might want to admit. True, changing habits of consumption, increasing access to an expanding popular press and publishing industry, as well as more traditional, oral aspects of working-class culture: all these converge to show a significant degree of cultural conservatism among working people. But, even if working people were certainly aware of the empire – especially as emigration to the colonies and the cheap postal service gained momentum – Thompson shows that awareness should not be confused with subservient imperialism or the deferential observance of an official line. Indeed, a good case is made for the empire as one source of the radicalisation of late-Victorian and Edwardian British society: both Ben Tillett and Tom Mann returned from the antipodes as far more radical politicians than when they had left Britain. This cultural and political independence is equally clear in respect of the trade unions: 'even when their own jobs were under threat, British workers were able to show some concern for the condition of coloured colonial workers and to support some of their political aspirations.' (p. 2) Similarly, the considerable resources invested in imperial propaganda by the authorities, from the Great Exhibition to the Festival of Britain, or the frequent presence of imperial themes at the cinema, should not be taken, Thompson rightly points out, as a measure of how films or propaganda were received. In the end, however, his inking is that so much popularity, as well as demonstrating popular awareness of empire, probably did also signal acceptance, if not enthusiasm, for the empire, rather than indifference or ignorance. Applying the criteria of age and gender to similar questions produces comparable results, though 'the precise attitudes that resulted are not open to easy generalisations'
Turning to the impact of empire on 'the political culture of the modern British state' (p. 124), Andrew Thompson is able to draw on a much more fully documented area. The considerable evidence to show that the empire 'struck back' on the machinery of British government and on the content and conduct of reform, is backed up by evidence gathered from records of the flourishing extra-parliamentary political culture of the Edwardian period and its vigorous promotion of empire or, in some cases, denunciation of it. Indeed, one of the important ways in which the empire struck back was the promotion of itself as a force for political reform and social renewal: Labour, as Thompson shows, was to make useful political capital on a number of occasions out of progressive social and political movements within the empire and directly or indirectly: 'the empire affected how the British chose to govern themselves' (p. 149) – not least on how to define the interventionist element of the state's role.

In deciding how to govern themselves, the British were also, in a sense, saying who they were. And it is in this area – the forging of a national identity – that the question mark in the book's title comes fully into its own, as Thompson explores the English language, British architecture, the monarchy and the army, all of which seem to throw up conflicting evidence for the degree of impact the empire had on 'Britishness'. In respect of the debate which has taken place in recent years, the evidence put forward here is important in showing how, among the constituent identities of the United Kingdom, it was the English identity which was most obviously suppressed by the imperial adventure. Perhaps because of that, there were attempts to hold onto the imperial legacy in post-1945 Britain. That legacy only really started to raise eyebrows and, in some cases, hackles, as the immigrants from former colonies later began to arrive in Britain: Thompson analyses in some detail the heated debate around immigration showing that it is difficult to see this as being defined solely in terms of its imperial dimension. Yet, that debate arguably represents the first point at which the British population was required to take stock and situate itself in relation to its imperial past: a process which continues to this day.

Having explored such a wealth of material – material which can be followed up in the detailed notes – Thompson is surely justified in wanting to preserve intact for his reader the sense of complexity and plurality in the way the British reacted to their empire. He is a 'splitter', not a 'lumper' and argues that, 'the empire's impact, far from being forceful and aggressive, was often subtle and unobtrusive'. In the end, 'the big theory behind [the] book is that there is no "big theory"' (p. 241). True, maintaining that degree of indeterminacy does not come cheap in rhetorical terms: some readers may be tempted to feel exasperation at what looks like inconclusiveness. Yet Thompson is clearly testing assumptions concerning the critical usefulness of more compartmentalised social, political or economic approaches to the often 'polysemic' evidence at our disposal. It would have made for a more comfortable read to argue that empire is everywhere, or that it is nowhere, in British society; or that empire was uniformly nasty and mean, a reactionary stick with which to beat the colonies; or that it was a magic wand to waft away the forces of reform at home. But, by amassing a number of pieces of evidence to suggest that the reforming component, say, of 'social imperialism' was at least as important as its nationalist/imperialist component, by looking again at the late-Victorian and Edwardian period's virtual obsession with the nature of the state, and then following this dove-tailing of political culture and national identity through to the very end of the twentieth century, this book modestly, but persistently, shows that the empire is still to be found deep within Britain.

Thompson is surely right to evacuate the issue of exactly 'how much' empire there was in Britain at any point from the mid-nineteenth century onwards, and to concentrate instead on the nature of the impact. Similarly, asking oneself to what extent it is possible to demonstrate that people were 'conscious' of the empire's presence is perhaps to put the wrong question. The whole issue of how empire was perceived and received will remain difficult, even impossible in many cases, to demonstrate. And yet, 'We should not downplay forces which shaped people's lives simply because they were unaware of them' (p. 40). There are enough examples amassed here to show that empire was clearly visible, not least at the time of the Wembley exhibition – precisely at the point, that is, when empire was about to be subsumed by the Commonwealth.

It is difficult to see how the imperial legacy in Britain might do anything other than remain ideologically
charged for the foreseeable future, and potentially divisive. Bearing this in mind, one of the most important ramifications of this book is its implied call for a more inclusive and, as it were, citizens' history. One of the main benefits to be derived from this reasoned, detailed, deliberately undramatic accommodation with the legacy of empire is the way in which it contributes to an approach which might help get Britain's political culture and British national identity more into step with each other.

Other reviews:
[2]

Source URL: https://reviews.history.ac.uk/review/531#comment-0

Links
[1] https://reviews.history.ac.uk/item/2942
[2] https://reviews.history.ac.uk/