

The Empire in One City? Liverpool's Inconvenient Imperial Past

Review Number: 737

Publish date: Tuesday, 31 March, 2009

Editor: Sheryllyne Haggerty

Anthony Webster

Nicholas J. White

ISBN: 978-0-7190-7887-3

Date of Publication: 2008

Price: £55.00

Pages: 256pp.

Publisher: Manchester University Press

Place of Publication: Manchester

Reviewer: John Belchem

On rare occasions, collections of conference proceedings have questioned paradigms and set new agendas, but for the most part this form of publication has limited impact and esteem, at least in the discipline of history. For those published straight after the event, collected conference papers tend to lack coherence and co-ordination. Where time is allowed for revision and cross-reference in the light of discussion and reflection, slippage often occurs so that by the time the volume finally appears it is already outdated, having been superseded by studies published in the interim. The editors of this collection of papers presented to a conference of the Centre for Liverpool and Merseyside Studies in April 2006 endeavour to avoid these dangers in two ways: first, by means of a strident interpretative introduction, tendentious and polemical in tone, suggesting a major re-alignment of Liverpool historiography; and second, in acknowledgment of delay, by cursory reference to some of the major publications which have appeared to mark the 800th anniversary in 2007 of the granting of letters patent to Liverpool and the city's status as European Capital of Culture in 2008. These practices are not deployed, however, with any uniformity or consistency throughout the volume.

The ambition displayed by the three editors in their joint introduction is formidable. Determined to impose a new master narrative, they reject the strap line of Liverpool's successful bid for Capital of Culture status, 'The world in one city', in favour of 'The empire in one city?' Given the tone of the introduction, the inclusion of a question mark would seem gratuitous. Liverpool historiography, we are informed, has been hoodwinked by the romance of the wide oceans, seduced and 'skewed' by an 'Atlantic and global focus' which 'subtly aligns the city with notions of free trade and cosmopolitan liberality, rather than the aggression, protection and oppression of empire' (p. 3). Historical revisionism of this order does little to rehabilitate Liverpool's adverse image and reputation, but it allows the editors to embrace a familiar Liverpudlian trope: self pity. As a major imperial hub, Liverpool has to be rescued from metropolitan condescension. To the editors' ire, the second city of empire is all but excluded from the London-centric focus of Cain and Hopkins' study of the 'gentlemanly capitalism' that shaped the imperial project.

In their determination to assert the hegemony of imperialism, the editors define the term – even when extended to informal empire – in absolute manner. Indeed, imperial, global and Atlantic are presented as mutually exclusive categories, a stance soon undermined by the economic history which informs the volume.

What follows the introduction is disappointing: individual contributions fail either to sustain the supposed revisionist purpose of the volume or even in some cases to engage with it. The theme demands a proper collection of essays, not a random bunch of (rapidly dated) conference papers.

The collection begins with Sheryllyne Haggerty's trenchant analysis of 'Liverpool, the slave trade and the British-Atlantic empire, c.1750–75'. A wealth of closely examined evidence from business records is offered to endorse and expand an earlier revisionist claim that "'Liverpool was more important for the slave trade than the slave trade was for Liverpool", or, indeed, for its merchants' (p. 29). Given the risks and unreliability of the slave trade, merchants maintained a diverse commercial portfolio (with dry goods and foodstuffs to the fore) across the British Atlantic empire *and beyond*. Imperial networks were but one aspect of 'a complex and diverse global imperial business profile' (p. 10). Here are the beginnings of Liverpool's exponential growth as a general cargo port of global significance.

Anthony Webster's study of 'Liverpool and the Asian trade, 1800–50: some insights into a provincial commercial network' shows how this growth continued by highlighting one of the ways in which Liverpool adjusted to abolition of the slave trade by developing new markets and networks, imperial and otherwise. Members of the Liverpool East India Association 'were readily persuaded of the benefits of a robust policy of imperial aggression' (p. 49) but this approach was part of a wider matrix which ensured that 'by the middle of the nineteenth century, Liverpool had become the principal exit point for British manufactures bound for the crucial specific markets of India and Pacific Asia, as well as a major warehousing and transit port for imported produce from "the East" generally' (p. 44). Here, too, imperial networks were part of a wider process (aided by deep-sea steam), enabling Liverpool, Webster concludes, 'to exert itself on a truly global scale' (p. 52).

The third member of the editorial troika, Nicholas J. White, appears much later in the volume with a paper on 'Liverpool shipping and the end of empire: the Ocean group in East and Southeast Asia, c. 1945–73'. In this period of attempted diversification but seemingly irreversible decline it is a moot point whether post-imperial or new European factors were more decisive. For White, the former were crucial, particularly as new developments by Merseyside-based companies such as Ocean to 'spread risk and/or circumvent economic nationalism in the era of decolonisation were increasingly taking place outside the region' (p. 182). In economic terms, the empire, it seems, mattered most precisely when it was no longer. Liverpool, White rues, 'ossified as a marooned imperial seaport in a post-colonial age, while, with an east-coast location, London was poised in the 1960s and 1970s to take full advantage of the EEC' (p. 183).

There was nothing new, of course, in the locational and other advantages enjoyed by London, aptly described by John M. MacKenzie, general editor of the 'Studies in Imperialism' series of which this volume forms a part, as 'one of the few capitals that combines all its administrative and financial functions with its status as the most significant port in the country'. (p. 218) In their study of 'Liverpool and South America, 1850–1930', Rory M. Miller and Robert G. Greenhill, stand apart from the editorial crusade against London-centricity. Initially the 'more dynamic centre' for trade with the 'informal empire' of Latin America, Liverpool was rapidly overtaken by London which lured first the merchant houses and then the shipping companies away from the Mersey:

Access to officials and to the machinery of government, membership of the House of Commons or House of Lords, institutional explanations and the availability of capital in London were all powerful attractions with which Liverpool could not compete. Moreover, the influence of Liverpool's close-knit network of business dynasties, important as a source of mercantile initiative in the middle of the nineteenth century, was of much less significance half a century later. The allure of networking with City capitalists and, to a lesser extent, Whitehall officials had replaced the dependence on family and friends in Liverpool (p. 90).

To an extent, Stephanie Decker's paper, 'Return to imperial trade? John Holt & Co (Liverpool) Ltd as a

contemporary free-standing company, 1945–2006’ offers some counterbalance. In its free-standing mode of organisation, here is a company which has come almost full circle in modern times, pursuing its core business and adhering to its traditional geographical connections in Nigeria:

Instead of showing weaker control structures than classical multinational companies, the set-up allows for closer *personal* control in a highly insecure environment ... The advantage of local knowledge, contacts, a good distribution network and, especially, the ability to be ambiguous about corporate nationality still enable Holt to be competitive in the modern economy (p. 203–5).

While informed by business theory, Decker’s paper looks beyond economic history to consider cultural factors. Attention is drawn to the company’s logo which combines a manila and a five-pointed star in the fashion of the famous White Star line: ‘In choosing a corporate logo from two historical symbols, one specific to Nigerian economic and cultural history, the other representative of Liverpool Atlantic history, the company continues to place itself as the agent linking those two places, which in turn defines its identity as an organisation’ (p. 188–9). Once again, the notable motif is inter-locking fusion not any specific imperial particularism.

This is also the case in Murray Steele’s paper, ‘Transmitting ideas of empire: representations and celebrations in Liverpool, 1886–1953’. The study begins with the International Exhibition of Navigation, Commerce and Industry in 1886, the occasion for a special feature on Liverpool – unfortunately ignored by Steele - in the *Illustrated London News*:

Liverpool, thanks to modern science and commercial enterprise, to the spirit and intelligence of the townsmen, and to the administration of the Mersey Docks and Harbour Board, has become a wonder of the world. It is the New York of Europe, a world-city rather than merely British provincial.[\(1\)](#)

Steele, however, notes the Atlantic connection in examining the historical pageant to mark the 700th anniversary in 1907 of the granting of letters patent: ‘The central figure in the final tableau, the “Goddess of Liverpool”, was attended by figures representing “Great Britain, Ireland, and all the Colonies and America bringing [Her] their Tributes of Merchandise’ (p. 129). While a refreshing change from the conventional economic history of other contributions, Steele’s paper (which tends to conflate imperialism and patriotism) needs to be read in conjunction with other studies of civic image and civic patriotism, including the recent flurry of publications by historians, sociologists and literary critics examining the latest exercises in civic boosterism and urban rebranding around the 800th anniversary in 2007 and then Capital of Culture year in 2008.[\(2\)](#)

While acknowledging recent critical work on cosmopolitan Liverpool [\(3\)](#) John Herson’s paper, “‘Stirring spectacles of cosmopolitan animation’: Liverpool as a diasporic city, 1825–1913’, marks a backward historiographical step, forgoing problematic cultural sources and studies [\(4\)](#) in favour of census statistics and Parliamentary Papers. As deployed here the awkward term ‘diasporic’ is devoid of any particular imperial connotation; and it is applied broad-brush (without due distinction between the differing needs and intentions of transients, sojourners and settlers) to the entire city rather than to the distinctive waterfront and ‘sailortown’ districts where it might have resonance.

Diane Frost’s paper, ‘The maligned, the despised and the ostracised: working-class white women, interracial relationships and colonial ideologies in nineteenth- and twentieth-century Liverpool’ is a poignant reminder that inter-marriage, regarded in most contexts as a register of racial integration, was stigmatized and condemned in Liverpool as *the* ‘social problem’. This too is a paper which should be read in conjunction with other studies, including those which deal with inter-marriage with the Chinese. Demonized in the Edwardian period for sexual deviance, Chinese husbands were swiftly rehabilitated in the binary polarities

which characterised social surveys of 1930s Merseyside: the very virtue of the Chinese served to emphasise the vice and ‘real social menace’ of the ‘negro’.[\(5\)](#)

Zachary Kingdon and Dmitri van den Bersselaar provide the most interesting of the cultural history papers, ‘Collecting empire? African objects, West African trade and a Liverpool museum’. Their conclusions, however, are far more nuanced than the editorial introduction would allow. While the connotations objects acquired were often influenced by imperial ideas, the actual building up of the Liverpool collection was ‘haphazard and unsystematic. It represented to some extent trading interests more than it did empire’ (p. 119). Furthermore, Africans were not simply passive suppliers of their material culture to Europeans: indeed, collecting became a struggle about whom could define the meanings of African artefacts.

With so many papers deviating from or simply ignoring the editorial interpretative introduction, it is perhaps not surprising that MacKenzie has added an ‘Afterword: Liverpool and empire – the revolving door?’ In a valiant effort to tie things together, he tackles head-on the vexed issue of Liverpool exceptionalism. By drawing a comparison with Glasgow, a truly imperial city, MacKenzie places Liverpool firmly within the British imperial system. There is much to commend in these comparative insights but the discussion is hindered by lack of engagement with the latest studies of Liverpool. Recent publications point the way to the most exciting approach to Liverpool’s past: a proverbial exception within Britain, Liverpool was the very exemplar of a world seaport. To understand Liverpool it is necessary to look wider than an ‘inconvenient imperial past’.

Notes

1. ‘Liverpool: port, docks and city’, *Illustrated London News*, 15 May 1886, quoted in John Belchem ‘Liverpool’s story is the world’s glory’ in *Merseypride: Essays in Liverpool Exceptionalism*, John Belchem (Revised 2nd ed., Liverpool, 2006), p.5.[Back to \(1\)](#)
2. Matthew Vickers, ‘Civic Image and Civic Patriotism in Liverpool 1880–1914’, unpublished PhD thesis, University of Oxford, 2000; *Reinventing the City: Liverpool in Comparative Perspective*, ed. R. Munck (Liverpool, 2003); Paul Jones and Stuart Wilks-Heeg, ‘Capitalising culture: Liverpool 2008’, *Local Economy*, 19 (2004), 341–60, a special edition on ‘Cultural Policy and Urban Regeneration’. John Belchem, ‘Celebrating Liverpool’ in *Liverpool 800: Culture, Character and History*, ed. John Belchem (Liverpool, 2006), pp. 9–57. See also Nicholas Murray, *So Spirited a Town: Visions and Versions of Liverpool* (Liverpool, 2007); and *Writing Liverpool: Essays and Interviews*, ed. Michael Murphy and Deryn Rees-Jones (Liverpool, 2007).[Back to \(2\)](#)
3. John Belchem and Donald M. MacRaild, ‘Cosmopolitan Liverpool’ in *Liverpool 800*, pp.311–92. John Belchem, *Irish, Catholic and Scouse: the History of the Liverpool-Irish, 1800–1939* (Liverpool 2007), ‘was published after this chapter went to press’ (p. 77).[Back to \(3\)](#)
4. For example, there is no engagement with the important anthropological work of Jacqueline Nassy Brown, *Dropping Anchor, Setting Sail: Geographies of Race in Black Liverpool* (Princeton, NJ, 2005).[Back to \(4\)](#)
5. ‘Cosmopolitan Liverpool’, p.380. See also, John Belchem, ‘Liverpool: world city’, *History Today*, 57 (April 2007), 48–55.[Back to \(5\)](#)

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