The British Empire: Themes and Perspectives

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The first question which may spring to the mind of any reader of this collection is: is it necessary or useful? Given the appearance in the not too distant past of the Oxford History of the British Empire, together with its themed volumes, can another edited collection on the empire contribute anything new or revealing? The editor is sensitive to this problem, and justifies the collection by claiming that the Oxford themed volumes are defined narrowly, and the series as a whole a multi-volume enterprise which, by implication, is unwieldy. I do not find this argument terribly convincing, not least because it fails to identify what for me is the potential strength of the collection, namely, an ability to stand back from the empirical record to reflect on the worth of recent scholarship in this field, and the current standing of the debates to which they have contributed. Judged in these terms the collection is most certainly worthwhile.

In confronting the challenge, Stockwell has gathered a pleasing mix of established figures and scholars at earlier stages in their careers. And only another editor can appreciate the work which must have been invested in providing stylistic integrity to the collection. Most of the chapters were therefore a pleasure to read; some provided fresh insight into what readers would consider to be familiar territory. Many of the themes addressed will come as no surprise. Thus are included Andrew Thompson’s discussion of the British state, Stephen Howe on the ideology of empire, Tony Ballantyne on knowledge, and Catherine Hall on culture and identity. I wish to return to the choice of themes later, but before doing so express particular enjoyments which some contributors offer.
John Darwin’s discussion of Britain’s empires is exemplary. As a necessary corrective to the idea that the empire somehow comprised a coherent whole, Darwin highlights the ‘extraordinary range of constitutional, political, economic, and cultural relationships contained within Britain’s multiple imperial connections’ (p. 1). Thus within the empire were to be found dominions, ‘dependencies’, and the informal empire of influence rather than direct rule. Such a seemingly chaotic configuration was very remote from any suggestion of a systematic empire built according to a master plan. He proceeds to trace out the course of events which underpinned the confusion, drawing careful attention to the different phases of empire building, how individuals, companies and arms of the imperial state were involved in promoting imperial strategies, and the differential impact on changing relationships between ‘centre’ and ‘periphery’. Little of the historic detail is new, but what Darwin does with particular skill is to bring the complex narrative of empire formation together – a task to which a collection of this nature is well suited.

The economics of empire is cogently examined by Andrew Dilley. Making the complexities of the topic surprisingly accessible, he surveys how a variety of thinkers from Adam Smith to Cain and Hopkins and their critics have viewed the putative role of economics in imperial expansion. In considering the consequences of this expansion, and using comparative experiences, Dilley gives solid accounts of the diffusionist and dependency models, before moving on to examine the vital but still neglected problem of the extent to which imperialism facilitated the transfer of wealth and promoted industrialization. Overall, what prevails is a sensibly cautious approach to overarching narratives and categorizations which tend to mask rather than shed light upon the economics of empire.

Finally, there is Jon Wilson’s chapter on agency, narrative and resistance. Perhaps the least conventional, but most welcome of the themes, this chapter opens up important debates on the voices, actions and powers of resistance of the colonized. The question of agency, Wilson claims, has been around for some time – it was evident, for example, in the work of progressive historians such as E. P. Thompson as they sought to capture history from below – but in important respects these concerns were predated by Indian nationalist scholars including Tagore and Bankim Chattopadhyay who celebrated indigenous folk culture. More recently, the work of the *Subaltern Studies* collective has sought to dismantle the convenient link between agency and nationhood by looking to the lives of the poor, most notably the peasantry. However, historians who have hoped to recover the agency of non-European peoples ‘face a series of judgements about the particular kind of agency they wish to narrate’ (p. 254). Between aspirations of national liberation and senses of apathetic victimhood lie a complex range of responses to colonial rule which have to be taken into account without imposing their own narrative structures. The difficulty (perhaps futility) of this task is well captured by Wilson.

These thought-provoking chapters are among the best of what is a well conceived and executed collection which should be of much interest to scholars of empire. Even the most seasoned of them will find here something of value. Overall, the book provides an intelligent, at times challenging survey of the most recent historiography of the British empire; in this, it does what it says on the cover.

I cannot finish, however, without raising a few issues. First, although it is not easy for an editor to make choices on the themes to be included, or more importantly, those to be left out, and any choice is always vulnerable to charges that the selection is biased or myopic, I do wish to question aspects of the choice. There is no chapter on gender or race, the reason being that since these categories are ubiquitous and should therefore be integral to explorations of all aspects of empire they do not require separate treatment. In theory this is perfectly correct, but in practice this is not evident. As we might expect, the chapters on religion, ideology, knowledge, and culture and identity do touch on gender and race, but there is little to suggest that in the collection as a whole these categories are woven into the very fabric of our understanding. Similar remarks apply to class, which is even more conspicuous by its absence.

The failure to foreground slavery represents something of a missed opportunity. Again, there are passing references to the economics of slavery and the impact of abolition, but what I had hoped for was a serious
attempt to locate the whole wretched episode within the broader experience of empire. Too often these phenomena are treated separately when what we need is a more highly developed sense of how their chronologies, geopolitics, cultures and economies were deeply intertwined. In this respect, collections of this nature have a responsibility not only to survey recent scholarship but equally importantly to identify areas that have been neglected and promise exciting new avenues of exploration. The British slave trade was of course abolished as Britain strove to build its ‘second empire’; with emancipation new sources of cheap labour were required, and a solution was found in the use of indentured labour. It seems to me that the South Asian diaspora so created was of immense historical import, and yet it too attracts hardly a mention in the collection.

Finally on the matter of silences, it was disappointing to find so little on the legacy of the British imperial experience. Stockwell herself contributes a characteristically well-crafted chapter on the end of empire, but this for the most part focuses on decolonization. The aftermath of empire has attracted a considerable body of stimulating work in recent years, and this is a timely moment to take stock. The continued turmoil experienced in former parts of the empire, and the dogged persistence of crises over ‘British’ identity serve to remind us that the legacy is tangible and not likely to diminish in the foreseeable future.

The second broad area of concern is that of periodization. It is clear that as far as the collection is concerned the British empire began in 1763, and for good reasons. This moment was something of a watershed, marking as it did victory in the Seven Years War and the acquisition of diwani rights in Bengal. Temporarily, Britain seemed to enjoy unassailable authority in the Atlantic system and was on the verge of a new wave of imperial expansion to the east. The problem is that by choosing to focus on overseas colonies, the previous phase of empire building is entirely neglected. Conventionally, the first British empire is seen to have its centre of gravity to the west, but arguably this earlier phase during which Britain as an internal empire was secured under English hegemony was of critical importance to the subsequent course of overseas empire building. Not only were significant sections of the Irish and Scottish aristocracy recruited to the ranks of Britain’s imperial elite, but Ireland in particular served as a laboratory for the development of imperial strategies in areas such as the military, land administration and finance.

In a similar vein we can inquire why imperial Britain seems to end around 1914. With the honourable exception of Stuart Ward’s chapter on the cultural underpinnings of imperial identities, the 20th century is comparatively neglected. This no doubt reflects the paucity of scholarship on the period, but here again an opportunity was missed to send out the urgent call for more work on vital issues including the imperial dimensions of total war, imperial roles in a changed world order, and the rise of nationalist struggles.

One final point relates to the contributors who, while collectively making an impressive array of leading scholars in the field, are from the western academy. Given the nature of the topic how much better it might have been to tap the rich intellectual resources of the former colonies to gain access to perhaps alternative and equally challenging perspectives.

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