

OXFORD HISTORY OF THE BRITISH EMPIRE

Companion Series



BRITAIN'S EXPERIENCE
OF EMPIRE IN THE
TWENTIETH CENTURY

EDITED BY ANDREW THOMPSON

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EDITOR-IN-CHIEF



*Britain's Experience
of Empire in the
Twentieth Century*



EDITED BY

Andrew Thompson

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FOREWORD

The purpose of the five volumes of the Oxford History of the British Empire was to provide a comprehensive survey of the Empire from its beginning to end, to explore the meaning of British imperialism for the ruled as well as the rulers, and to study the significance of the British Empire as a theme in world history. The volumes in the Companion Series carry forward this purpose. They pursue themes that could not be covered adequately in the main series while incorporating recent research and providing fresh interpretations of significant topics.

Wm. Roger Louis

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PREFACE AND ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

In redrawing the intellectual map of British imperial history, considerable emphasis has rightly been placed over the last twenty or so years on bringing Britain itself back into the story of empire, and on integrating metropole and colony in a single analytic frame. However, notwithstanding a rapidly expanding historiography, the chronological focus of much of this ‘new’ scholarship has been upon the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. With this current volume of the *Oxford History of the British Empire* Companion Series, I am grateful for the opportunity to redress the balance by exploring how imperialism reached back into the life of the British peoples, and how their identities were constituted through connections to empire, during *the twentieth century*. In short, how was Britain’s own ‘domestic’ history shaped by its extensive imperial involvements at a time when the empire was weathering the storms of the two world wars, was subsequently dismantled, and then (apparently) was gone?

As general editor of the *OHBE*, special thanks go to William Roger Louis—a source of warm encouragement and sage advice from the project’s beginning to end. John Darwin kindly hosted and chaired a very stimulating workshop at Nuffield College, Oxford, at which contributors were able to present and discuss early drafts of their chapters; he subsequently provided extremely helpful comments on the manuscript as a whole. David Omissi’s suggestions for the ‘Introduction’ and ‘Afterword’ were characteristically perceptive, as were his comments on my own chapter. Further thanks go to Saul Dubow, Kent Fedorowich, Richard Grayson, Peter Mandler, Stuart Ward, and Richard Whiting for reading and commenting on parts of the text.

Meaghan Kowalsky showed considerable resourcefulness in gathering many of the materials for my chapter. She also took on much of the responsibility for liaising with the contributors, for which I am indebted to her. William Jackson provided some much-needed editorial support towards the end of the project. While working on this volume, Jan Franklin and Helen Wilson were my personal assistants, respectively as Faculty Dean and Pro-Vice Chancellor for Research, and thanks therefore go to both of them.

My team of contributors were a real pleasure to work with, and I am grateful for the way they responded so positively to my comments on drafts of their chapters. In the middle of the project I suffered a family bereavement and their understanding during this time was much appreciated. My editor at Oxford University Press, Stephanie Ireland, was tremendously supportive, particularly in the final stages of preparing the manuscript for submission.

Finally, thanks are also due to my wife, Sarah Lenton, who took a far greater interest in this volume than one could reasonably have expected, and who will no doubt be pleased to see it in print.

Andrew Thompson

University of Leeds

April 2011

Introduction

Andrew Thompson

I

This volume is the first systematic investigation of the impact of imperialism upon twentieth-century Britain.¹ Because of their broader remit, the five volumes that comprised the main series of the *Oxford History of the British Empire* did not set out to provide the reader with a detailed focus upon the ways in which the empire was experienced in Britain, whereas this volume aims to do exactly that.² In pursuit of this goal, its contributors range widely across various aspects of British private and public life. They consider societal responses to the empire, and the place of the colonies in the public imagination, alongside imperialism's more tangible effects upon demography, trade, party politics, government policy, the churches and civil society, and the armed forces. The time frame adopted by the volume is also distinctive. Studies of Britain's 'imperial experience' deal mainly with the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.³ The twentieth century, including the

¹ There are, however, several important studies of the effects of empire upon Britain during and after the Second World War. See esp. S. Ward (ed.), *British Culture and the End of Empire* (Manchester, 2001); S. Rose, *Which People's War: National Identity and Citizenship in Britain, 1939–1945* (Oxford, 2004); and W. Webster, *Englishness and Empire, 1939–1965* (Oxford, 2005).

² Of particular relevance to this Companion volume is Wm. R. Louis and J. M. Brown (eds.), *The Oxford History of the British Empire (OHBE)*, iv. *The Twentieth Century* (Oxford, 1999). Chapters in that volume by Ronald Hyam ('The British Empire in the Edwardian Era'), David Fieldhouse ('The Metropolitan Economics of Empire'), Stephen Constantine ('Migrants and Settlers'), Nicholas Owen ('Critics of Empire in Britain'), and John MacKenzie ('The Popular Culture of Empire in Britain') are all relevant and helpful to the present enquiry. For a review of *OHBE* iv, see A. S. Thompson, 'Is Humpty Dumpty Together Again? Imperial History and the Oxford History of the British Empire', *Twentieth Century British History (TCBH)*, 12 (2001), 511–27.

³ For the 18th and 'long' 19th centuries, see K. Wilson, *A New Imperial History: Culture, Identity and Modernity in Britain and the Empire, 1660–1840* (Cambridge, 2004); L. Colley,

interwar era and so-called ‘wars of decolonization’, has attracted much less scrutiny, while the twilight decades of the 1960s and 1970s, when the majority of the British people began to evaluate the loss of empire, are barely mentioned at all. Given that a major motivation for rediscovering the imperial past is the belief that it has been a formative influence upon our ‘postcolonial’ present, this neglect of the twentieth century is distinctly puzzling. It is this neglect which the present volume seeks to redress.

The move of empire from the sidelines to the centre stage of British historiography, however weighted towards the Hanoverian and Victorian periods, is now so well established that it is worth reminding ourselves of the situation which had previously pertained. In the wake of decolonization, academic study of the empire was directed overwhelmingly towards its so-called periphery in Africa, Asia, and the Pacific. ‘Empire’ was something that was judged to have happened overseas; although originating in Britain, imperialism remained marginal to the lives of most British people. This view that Britain’s ‘domestic’ history was relatively impervious to foreign and imperial influences prevailed for at least thirty years, if not longer. It was held by the majority of British historians, whatever their period of specialization—indeed, just as the acquisition of colonies was little more than a matter of superficial pride, so too their loss was felt to be only temporarily disconcerting.⁴ It followed that imperial history could justifiably be held at arm’s length from national history as a largely separate branch of enquiry.

It would be a long time before historians of modern Britain were to seriously reconsider this marginalization of the empire. This development owed much to the launch of John MacKenzie’s Manchester University Press

Captives: Britain, Empire and the World, 1600–1850 (London, 2003); C. Hall, *Civilising Subjects: Metropole and Colony in the English Imagination* (Chicago, 2002); B. Porter, *The Absent-Minded Imperialists: Empire, Society and Culture in Britain* (Oxford, 2004); A. S. Thompson, *The Empire Strikes Back? The Impact of Imperialism on Britain from the Mid-Nineteenth Century* (Harlow, 2005).

⁴ P. Calvocoressi, *The British Experience, 1945–1975* (London, 1978), 245. For the view that the empire was on the whole an irrelevant factor in the lives of most Britons, see M. Beloff, *Imperial Sunset*, i (London, 1969), 19; G. Elton, *The English* (Oxford, 1992), 234; J. Morris, ‘The Popularisation of Imperial History: The Empire on Television’, *Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History (JICH)*, 1/1 (1972), 113–18. For the revival of ‘Little Englander’ history at the end of the 20th century, see D. Cannadine, ‘British History as a “New Subject”: Politics, Perspectives and Prospects’, in A. Grant and K. J. Stringer (eds.), *Uniting the Kingdom: the Making of British History* (London, 1995), 12–13, 27–8.

series, 'Studies in Imperialism', over a quarter of a century ago in 1984. The early volumes in the series, especially those written or edited by John MacKenzie himself, challenged the then prevailing assumption that imperialism was of little relevance to Britain's domestic history, and gave fresh impetus to the study of how the empire was represented in British popular culture—indeed, few facets of the media and entertainment industry were left untouched.⁵ Since then, MacKenzie's series (shortly to reach a hundred volumes) has vigorously promoted the idea that imperialism was as much a cultural as a political, military, or diplomatic phenomenon. It has been highly influential in establishing the view that empire had 'as significant an effect on the dominant as on the subordinate societies', and should therefore be considered as an integral part of Britain's own history. Many 'Studies in Imperialism' titles are accordingly cited by contributors to this volume.

Alongside, and intersecting with the 'Studies in Imperialism' series, the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries also witnessed a marked 'cultural turn' in the field of British history, a turn closely tied to the challenge of bringing the empire back into the story of the making of modern Britain.⁶ Influenced by postmodernist and feminist theory, a group of scholars, loosely labelled 'new' imperial historians, have changed the ways in which both academics and a wider public think about Britain's imperial past, and the reversal of the colonial encounter has been among their chief concerns.⁷ Particular emphasis has been placed upon the (contested) terminology of empire and the multiple meanings attributed to the concepts of 'imperialism' and 'colonialism'; the gender dynamics of Britain as a colonizing power, and the relationship between sexual experiences in the colonies and notions of masculinity and femininity 'at home'; and the ideological underpinnings of imperial power—especially the ways in which British discourses of 'otherness', race, and miscegenation were fashioned in

⁵ See esp. J. M. MacKenzie, *Propaganda and Empire: The Manipulation of British Public Opinion, 1880–1960* (Manchester, 1984); id. (ed.), *Imperialism and Popular Culture* (Manchester, 1986); and id. (ed.), *Popular Imperialism and the Military, 1850–1950* (Manchester, 1992).

⁶ For the contribution of postcolonial perspectives to 'bringing Britain itself back into the story of empire', see Dane Kennedy's insightful essay, 'Postcolonialism and History', in G. Huggan (ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of Postcolonial Studies* (Oxford, forthcoming).

⁷ For some acute observations on the 'new' imperial history, including how the term needs to be approached in the plural rather than the singular, see S. Howe (ed.), *The New Imperial Histories Reader* (London, 2009), esp. 1–4.

response to the requirements of the so-called ‘civilizing mission’.⁸ Again, however, it bears repeating that much of this new work focuses upon the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The repercussions of empire for Britain in the twentieth century, both during and between the two world wars, and continuing into the era of decolonization, have received much less attention, while the ‘after-effects’ of empire—its longer-term legacies and contemporary resonances—have been discussed and debated much more by cultural studies scholars working in the field of postcolonial studies than by historians themselves.⁹

What were the effects of imperialism on Britain’s ‘domestic’ history as the empire weathered the storms of two world wars, was subsequently

⁸ From a wide literature, on sex and gender broadly see A. Burton (ed.), *Gender, Sexuality and Colonial Modernities* (London, 1999); P. Levine (ed.), *Gender and Empire, Oxford History of the British Empire Companion Series* (Oxford, 2004); A. Woollacott, *Gender and Empire* (Basingstoke, 2006). On masculinity, see J. Tosh, *Manliness and Masculinities in Nineteenth Century Britain* (Harlow, 2005), 173–214; Webster, *Englishness and Empire*, 184–217. On race and gender within Britain itself, see A. Burton, *At the Heart of Empire: Indians and the Colonial Encounter in late-Victorian Britain* (Berkeley, 1998); S. Lahiri, *Indians in Britain: Anglo-Indian Encounters, Race and Identity, 1880–1930* (London, 1999). On the development of racial discourse, see D. Lorimer, ‘From Victorian Values to White Values: Assimilation and Exclusion in British Racial Discourse, c.1870–1914’, in P. Buckner and D. Francis (eds.), *Rediscovering the British World* (Calgary, 2005). On the specific issue of miscegenation see L. Bear, ‘White Women and Men of Colour: Miscegenation Fears in Britain after the Great War’, *Gender and History*, 17 (2004), 29–61.

⁹ One issue that *has* attracted significant attention is how the empire is publicly remembered. See, for example, the reception of the work of two Harvard historians, Niall Ferguson and Caroline Elkins. Ferguson, whose view of the British empire can be surmised from the subtitle to his book (and accompanying TV series), *Empire: How Britain Made the Modern World* (London, 2003), has been criticized for failing to recognize the violent and exploitative aspects of the British empire as well as the agency of non-Europeans. Ferguson dismisses these criticisms as left-wing polemic. For further discussion, see J. E. Wilson, ‘Niall Ferguson’s Imperial Passion’, *History Workshop Journal*, 56 (2003), 175–83. A related controversy has surrounded the British military response to the Mau Mau uprising in Kenya, examined in Elkins’s book, *Britain’s Gulag: The Brutal End of Empire in Kenya* (London, 2005). Here debate has focused on the precise numbers of Kikuyu killed as a result of the Emergency, as well as the total number incarcerated in British internment camps. For further discussion, see Richard Drayton, ‘The British Empire and Kenya Deaths’, *The Guardian* (16 June 2010). A more wide-ranging assessment of Elkins’s work is provided by Daniel Branch’s *Defeating Mau Mau and Creating Kenya: Counterinsurgency, Civil War and Decolonisation* (Cambridge, 2009). For an excellent comparative essay on the historiography of decolonization, which sets the reception of Ferguson’s and Elkins’s books in a wider context, see R. Aldrich and S. Ward, ‘Ends of Empire: Decolonizing the Nation in British and French Historiography’, in S. Berger and C. Lorenz (eds.), *Nationalising the Past: Historians as Nation Builders in Modern Europe* (Basingstoke, 2010).

dismantled, and then apparently was gone? What sort of interpretative framework might help us to make sense of the shifting role of empire in British culture, society, and politics across a century that saw profound changes in the ways in which culture functioned and society and politics were organized? In their respective fields of expertise, the contributors to this volume were each asked to reflect on these questions in order to build up a better picture of the ‘domestic’ repercussions of empire for Britain in the twentieth century.¹⁰ The result of their efforts is the first volume in the *Oxford History of the British Empire* Companion Series to compare and contrast the effects of empire across different facets of British public and private life. By focusing on the twentieth century, moreover, the contributors to this volume were drawn to the fascinating yet complex question of what type of challenges the imperial past presents for contemporary Britain. Their reflections upon how the empire’s legacies are being experienced, interpreted, and debated in Britain today are drawn together and developed further at the end of this book.

II

The chapters that follow provide the reader with a variety of insights and perspectives into Britain’s experience of empire during the twentieth century. They were written by specialists from various fields—including political, economic, and religious history; foreign policy and international relations; and histories of race, gender, identity, and popular culture. Yet although they pursue different lines of enquiry, it is nonetheless possible to pick out several recurring themes. Among the most striking of these is the degree to which many people in Britain continued, even after the so-called ‘high noon of empire’, to be involved in a wider British world to which they often had a direct functional connection. The empire’s presence was, therefore, widely

¹⁰ Chapters in *OHBE* iv which touch most directly upon the present volume’s concerns, include: David Fieldhouse on ‘metropolitan economics’, Stephen Constantine on ‘migration and settlers’, John Mackenzie on ‘popular culture’, and Nicholas Owen on ‘critics’. Meanwhile, several chapters in other *OHBE* Companion volumes, including Barbara Bush’s ‘Gender and Empire: the Twentieth Century’ in *Gender and Empire*, Winston James’s ‘The Black Experience in Twentieth Century Britain’ in *Black Experience and the British Empire*, and Alvin Jackson’s ‘Ireland, the Union, and the Empire’ in *Ireland and the British Empire*, illuminate aspects of the present enquiry. See also the Companion volume on *Scotland and the British Empire*, edited by John MacKenzie and Tom Devine (2011).

felt across British society: it was far from being the exclusive domain of the privileged few who ran it, as is sometimes suggested or implied.¹¹ In this volume the reader will encounter diverse groups of Britons for whom the empire was often close to their everyday thoughts—national servicemen, as well as regular soldiers, who fought in the colonies during the two world wars and subsequent counter-insurgency campaigns; the family and friends of emigrants to the empire who kept in close contact with their loved ones overseas; a wide spectrum of the professional middle classes who sought to advance their careers within the British world; several of Britain's major industrialists, such as the Lancashire cotton mill owners, Dundee jute barons, and shipping magnates, whose fortunes were tied to the availability of raw materials in the colonies and the accessibility of colonial markets; and several other branches of trade in which the workforce as well as management would have been acutely aware of the fact that their prosperity depended upon Britain's ability to ensure the free flow of goods and capital around (and beyond) the empire. In their own ways, all of these social groups engaged with the empire, and, to varying degrees, their interests and identities were defined by it. The prospect of a significant shift in the basis of Britain's relations with the outside world thus carried real and tangible consequences for people across many walks of British society.

Societal responses to empire were not, of course, forged only through travel, trade, emigration, or warfare. They were also mediated through the realm of the imagination. In fact, it may well be that as many people in Britain encountered the empire through imperial imagery circulated by the mass media as they did through the more tangible types of connection described above. The twentieth century witnessed the advent of exciting new technologies which had the power to transport ordinary people out of their day-to-day lives to exotic foreign destinations. These technologies were actively harnessed for propagating and publicizing the empire.¹² Moreover, the appeal of empire through later Victorian and Edwardian literary influences also proved remarkably persistent, lasting until at least

¹¹ See e.g. Thompson, *The Empire Strikes Back?*, 3–5, 9–11, 239–41.

¹² S. J. Potter, *News and the British World: The Emergence of a British Press System* (Oxford, 2003); S. Nicholas, “‘Brushing Up Your Empire’: Dominion and Colonial Propaganda on the BBC's Home Service, 1939–1945,” *JICH* 31 (2003), 207–30; C. Kaul (ed.), *Media and the British Empire* (London, 2006); J. Richards, *The Age of the Dream Palace: Cinema and Society in Britain 1930–1939* (London, 1984); On the wider impact of the new media, see J. Gardiner, *The Thirties: An Intimate History* (London, 2010).

the 1950s, and arguably beyond.¹³ It was the disillusioned former colonial policeman turned critic of empire in India, George Orwell, who once claimed that most people were ‘influenced far more than they would care to admit by novels, serial stories, films and so forth, and that from this point the worst books are often the most important, because they are usually the ones that are read earliest in life’.¹⁴ Adventure stories, children’s fiction, and missionary literature established in the public mind an association, however vague, between ‘black people’, superstition, and savagery—an association that underpinned the view that the British presence in places like Kenya and Malaya, whatever resistance it encountered, was nonetheless a ‘civilizing’ one against incurably ‘backward’ peoples. As Wendy Webster’s and Andrew Thompson’s chapters explain, these messages were reinforced and spread more widely during the interwar and post-war periods by the cinema and radio, as imperialists also tried to persuade the public that the empire could be accommodated to the desire for greater social improvement at home.

Another theme to emerge clearly from this volume is the extent to which the empire enveloped the British people’s outlook on the rest of world for much of the twentieth century. (The shadow it casts on today’s ‘post-imperial’ age is addressed separately in Chapter 9, ‘Afterword’.) Krishan Kumar rightly cautions against the temptation to read empires teleologically—‘to see their end as somehow foreordained’. In fact, there was little sense or anticipation among British politicians or a wider public of a retreat from empire until after the 1956 Suez Crisis. People in Britain lived with colonial rule and expected it to continue. Only a few years after the shock of the loss of Singapore, the Labour Party was busy promoting a new social democratic vision of empire, the counterpart to the welfare state at home. Singapore did indeed deal a severe psychological blow to the British, with a Mass Observation survey of 1942 recording that the public were questioning both the circumstances in which the colonies had previously been acquired and those under which they might subsequently be governed

¹³ On literature and empire see Thompson, Ch. 7 in this volume. From a growing body of works, see also R. Anderson, *The Purple Heart Throbs: The Sub-Literature of Love* (1974); D. Bivona, *British Imperial Literature, 1870–1940: Writing and the Administration of Empire* (Cambridge, 1998); P. Lassner, *Colonial Strangers: British Women Writing the End of the British Empire* (New Brunswick, NJ, 2004); D. S. Mack, *Scottish Fiction and the British Empire* (Edinburgh, 2006); J. Richards (ed.), *Imperialism and Juvenile Literature* (Manchester, 1989); J. Rose, *The Intellectual Life of the British Working Classes* (New Haven, 2001).

¹⁴ G. Orwell, *The Complete Works*, ed. P. Davison (London, 1998), ii. 74.