The Lures of Empire: Present, Past, and Future
Colley, Linda
Queen's Quarterly; Fall 2005; 112, 3; ProQuest
pg. 394

Britain's navy achieved magnificent victories in the age of imperialism, both protecting Britain's colonies and snatching those of other imperial powers. But the glory of victory was small consolation to those Englishmen brutally pressed into service.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

LINDA COLLEY

The Lures of Empire: Present, Past, and Future

The word "empire," political scientist Joseph Nye remarked recently, "has come out of the closet." The United States' deployment of its unparalleled military power to enforce regime change in Afghanistan and Iraq, its current occupation of the latter country, and shifts in political language and style in Washington have all brought into wider consciousness arguments and anxieties that have been building up for some time. Yet for all this highly charged controversy – and not simply because of it – public discourse about empire in general, and American versions of it in particular, is often historically shallow and insufficiently comprehensive. This is sometimes the case even in academe, where in recent decades empire has been the object of intense and impassioned scrutiny.

As a historian of Britain's imperial and national experience, and as an occasional writer on contemporary politics, I have necessarily had to think a great deal in recent years about empire and its difficulties. And it is the difficulties of empire that I wish to address here. I want first to look at some recent arguments about America's purported new imperialism, and at the reluctance to situate this in an appropriately long and comparative perspective. Second, I want to glance at some of the practical and ideological strains experienced by the British in regard to their empire. Finally, I want to touch on some likely difficulties to do with empire in the future. For – to paraphrase and expand on Trotsky's aphorism

LINDA COLLEY is Shelby M.C. Davis 1958 Professor of History at Princeton University. Her most recent book is *Captives: Britain, Empire and the World 1600-1850* (2002). This article is an edited version of her Chancellor Dunning Trust Lecture, presented at Queen's University on 25 November 2004.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

about the dialectic – you may not be interested in empire, but manifestations of empire may still be interested in you.

I America's Imperial Dilemma

ONE of the better popular books on recent global troubles has been that of the historical sociologist Michael Mann. In *Incoherent Empire* (2003), he points out that the US has adopted some of the strategies that formerly underpinned Pax Britannica. As the British once did, the US has assembled islands across the globe to serve as military and naval bases, in some cases, as with Diego Garcia in the Indian Ocean, actually taking over onetime British "possessions." Like the British in their imperial heyday, the US normally preaches free trade (while sometimes deviating from it in practice), and for broadly similar reasons. This serves to identify the primacy of the paramount economic and political power with the wider global good, and tends to expand the great power's economic reach. The US also practises what Ronald Robinson and John Gallagher famously termed (in regard to nineteenth-century Britain) "informal empire": that is, it uses economic clout and other indirect means to regulate territories that are not susceptible to direct military or political control. So while postwar US governments have employed threats of force to unseat democratically elected leaders in the Dominican Republic and Chile, in Cuba's case, after the Bay of Pigs fiasco, different methods were employed. "Cuba has been ruined by the US boycott," writes Mann, "which presumably deters other Caribbean or Central American countries from following its example and defying the US."

Mann also probes the familiar argument that Americans are congenitally too uncomfortable with the idea of empire ever to be seriously tempted to indulge in it. "Most Americans say they do not even want a territorial Empire," he remarks: "But the British, the French, the Belgians, etc., also claimed that." His claim that America's empire is incoherent – that is, unworkable – does not rest then on any fond belief that its citizens have been reliably inoculated against imperialism by their history and political ideals. Rather, he discounts the possibility of an "Age of American Empire" on the grounds that it is not feasible. The US armed forces, he insists, will not accept the high casualties necessarily involved in permanently playing global policeman.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

George Washington's victories enabled his compatriots to press ahead with their conquest of the western frontier, all the way to the Gulf of Mexico and the Pacific.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

The Battle of Lexington, 19 April 1775, when British troops and colonial militia clashed for the first time – the start of a long struggle over the meaning of empire.

He believes there is no developed popular culture in America that will sustain a full-blown "imperial project" – and, crucially, he insists that empire is now at odds with the spirit of the age. The US can certainly intrude into and overwhelm other countries with terrifying ease, but Mann argues that by acting in this fashion it risks compromising its ideological and moral power and hence its real hegemony. Moreover – as Joseph Nye and others have pointed out – since the US spends almost sixteen times more on its military than on the institutions it would need for police work and nation building overseas, it arguably lacks the means and the knowledge to reconfigure – in its own desired image – those societies it chooses to knock down. "The enemies of the United States are wrong to see it ... as the Evil Empire," Mann insists: "It is not that well organized."

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

Michael Mann is of the left; Stefan Halper and Jonathan Clarke (*America Alone*, 2003) are self-declared moderate conservatives. Yet all three scholars sometimes lend credence to an overly narrow and presentist interpretation of American empire. They discuss it almost exclusively in terms of its overseas activities, and represent America's current foreign adventures very much as an aberration resulting from a recent partisan configuration in Washington. Yet it was not some neocon apparatchik but Madeleine Albright, during the Clinton presidency, who declared that: "If we have to use force, it is because we are America. We are the indispensable nation. We stand tall, and we see further into the future." Moreover, the attitudes that make possible this sort of language can be traced back to the very start of the American republic, and earlier.

To be sure, the revolution of 1776 made imperial Britain the new republic's first and most enduring defining Other. Yet how Americans imagined themselves continued to be inflected by their former imperial connection, and in some respects the revolution actually fostered imperial ideologies and actions. A conviction that the new United States embodied universally relevant political and legal principles merged easily – and always has – with the idea that it was therefore America's special role to remake the world in its own virtuous image. There is a clear line of development from Tom Paine's boast in 1775 that "We have it in our power to begin the world all over again," through Woodrow Wilson's insistence, some years before his presidency, that "every nation of the world needs to be drawn into the tutelage of America," to Albright's sublimely arrogant evocation of the US as the signal all-seeing saviour nation.

The revolution also strengthened the Protestant providentialism that a majority of colonists had inherited from Britain. More even than before, Americans after 1776 were encouraged to believe that their country was "Godland," to borrow Conor Cruise O'Brien's coinage, the city on the hill. As with other empires, this sense of divine favour could both drive expansionism and legitimize it. Americans were "willing to admit that all other nations are self-seeking," Irving Babbitt once remarked, "but as for ourselves, we hold that we act only on the most disinterested motives." For how could Godland possibly do wrong? And how could extending its sway be anything but good? More mundanely, the removal of British imperial controls after 1776 accelerated the rate of westward migration and settlement. In a single generation, newly independent Americans

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

seized more land on their continent than had been occupied during the entire imperial period.

These actions have long since ceased to be widely viewed as colonization or imperialism. These lands have become thoroughly absorbed into America's own geo-body. They appear a given.

As this suggests, there is a sense in which the business of empire, *provided it is overland and successful,* resembles the definition of treason offered by the old rhyme:

> *Treason doth never prosper:*
> *What's the reason?*
> *For if it prosper,*
> *None dare call it treason.*

Similarly, if an overland empire has prospered, people tend not to call it empire. Public and scholarly responses to the one-time Soviet Union bear this out. Since that construct's collapse in the 1980s, references to the "Soviet Empire" have become commonplace; so have works comparing it to other dead empires. But before 1970 the phrase "Soviet Empire" was rarely heard. This vast overland, multi-national state had to disintegrate before its imperial quality could be widely acknowledged. There is a sense in which the US offers a mirror image of this. Because it has prospered, and because it has cohered, few bother to analyze it systematically as an overland empire (as well as, sporadically, an overseas empire). Courses in imperial American history are rarely taught in US schools and universities. *Perspectives,* the trade magazine of the American Historical Association, regularly advertises university appointments in British, Russian, and Ottoman imperial history, but never – to my knowledge – positions exclusively devoted to America's own imperial experiences. To be sure, some very able Americanists are now exploring the varieties of this society's empire-making over time. But in terms of the formal organization and presentation of history in American universities, and still more in US public history, the phenomenon of empire remains substantially othered.

Why is this? Why are most Americans apparently so reluctant to acknowledge their internal colonization in the past and their post-modern versions of empire now? The favourite current answer is Niall Ferguson's: they are simply in denial. This view holds that because of how American history is traditionally taught and interpreted, and because post-1945 de-colonization has made empire an increasingly pejorative concept, most Americans either do not know, or refuse at

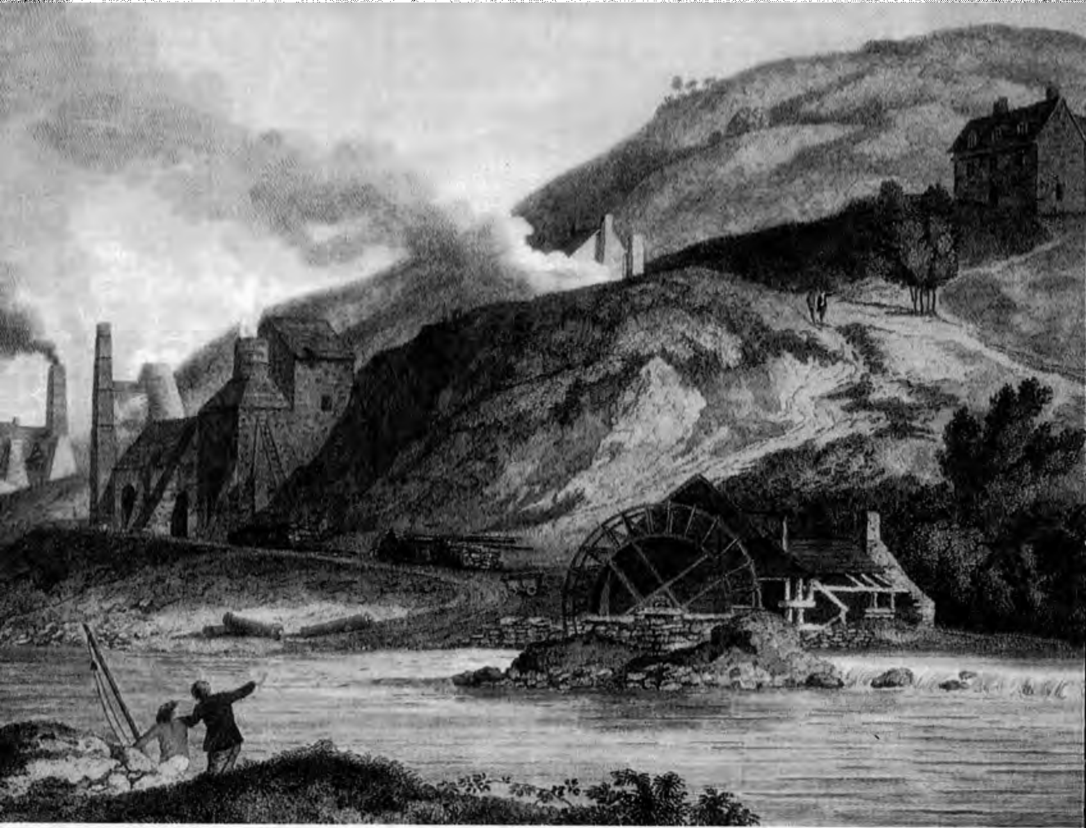
Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

British troops land in New York, 1776, where they will successfully drive out American forces and remain until the end of the Revolutionary War.

some level to confront, this aspect of their past and present. Yet this is only part of the answer, and not the most interesting part.

Ever since 1776, some Americans *have* been willing to confront and debate issues of empire. As James G. Wilson shows, American politicians of the late eighteenth century and the nineteenth century regularly described their polity as an "empire," and while they often employed this term in order to proclaim that the US was now a self-governing entity, it did "not follow that they stripped the word of all potentially disturbing implications." At almost every stage of America's overland expansion, there were individuals within its boundaries who either applauded or condemned what was happening as evidence of home-grown imperialism. "It is not consistent with the spirit of a republican government," a Connecticut congressman complained of the Louisiana Purchase in 1803, "that its territory should be exceedingly large"; "We have not adopted a system of colonization," remarked a senator opposing the settlement of Oregon in 1843, "and it is to be hoped we never shall."

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.



England's nineteenth-century colonial machinery drew strength from that nation's growing industrial might and technological know-how. Iron works like this one in western Britain provided the raw materials for everything from massive cannon and revolutionary building materials to the most delicate scientific instruments.

American historians also sometimes conceded their country's more imperial aspects. The prime interpreter of the western "frontier," Frederick Jackson Turner, was understandably forthright on this score. "The United States is ... an empire," he wrote, "a collection of potential states, rather than a single nation." Like his contemporary, Henry Adams, Turner also believed that America's overseas adventures were a natural extension of its earlier internal colonialism. In the 1890s, the decade that witnessed US annexation of the Philippines, Puerto Rico, and Cuba, he wrote:

> For nearly three centuries the dominant fact of American life has been expansion.... The demands for a vigorous foreign policy, for an inter-oceanic canal, for a revival of our power upon the seas, and for the extension of American influence to outlying islands and adjoining countries, are indications that the movement will continue.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

In the earlier twentieth century, too, attitudes toward empire among America's elite were uneven and complex. Franklin D. Roosevelt was genuinely repelled by the excesses of the British Empire and was determined to dismantle it. But, as Roger Louis demonstrates, Roosevelt was also determined that American global preponderance should be constructed firmly on Pax Britannica's ruins. Some more rightward-leaning American intellectuals and officials in the 1940s and '50s were crudely explicit on this point. A member of the OSS, the forerunner of the CIA, wrote:

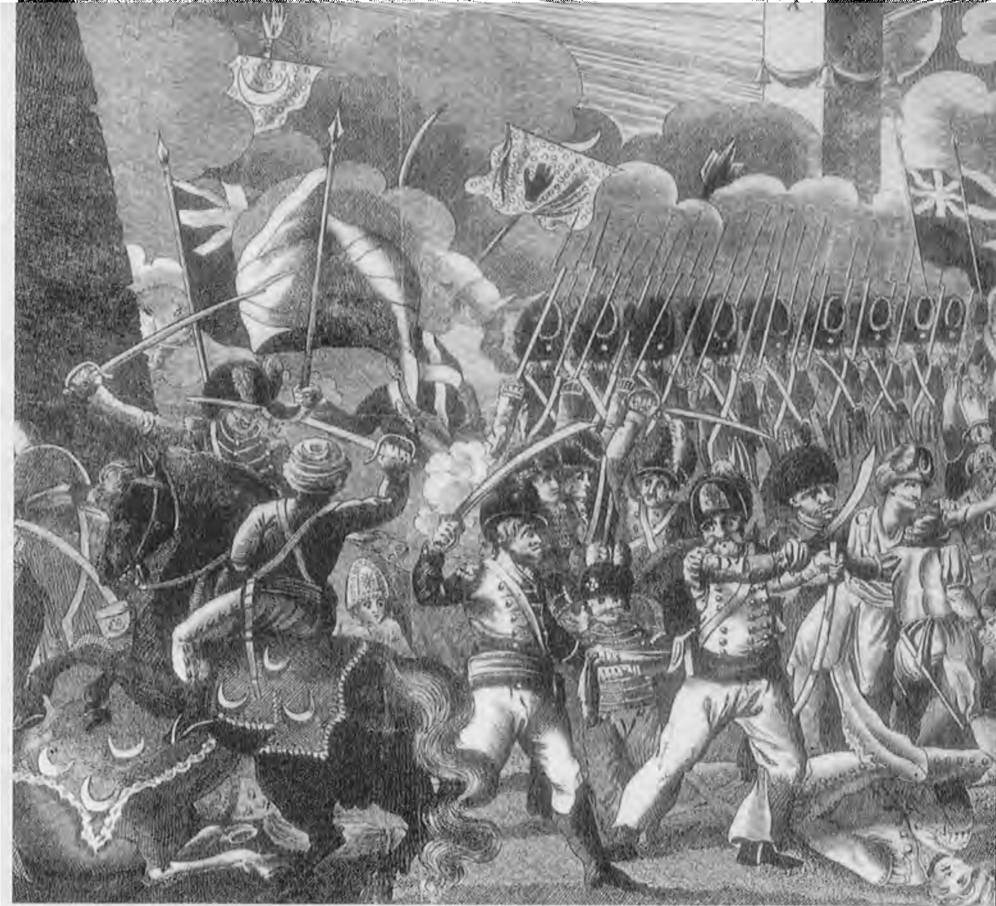
> The first great plan ... is for the United States to become what might be called the 'receiver' for the disintegrating British Empire.... The attempt is to swing the orientation of the Empire from its historical dependence on Europe to dependence on and subordination to the American central area. Success in the case of the English Dominion [Canada] and possessions located in the Americas is already at hand.

Such arguments demonstrate again that invocations of American global supremacy possess a considerable national ancestry (though I stress that these issues have always been contested both within Washington and outside). Yet despite such examples of American elite awareness and endorsement of empire, and despite their country's massive global reach today, many – perhaps most – Americans today exhibit limited interest in or knowledge of imperial projects; and this, too, needs pondering. For such detachment on the part of those who might be expected to be most vitally absorbed by issues of empire is not without some telling precedents.

II Britain's Heart of Darkness

THE most obvious precedent – unsurprisingly – is the behaviour of many Britons at the height of *their* global dominion. There is currently something of a schism among British historians between those who argue for empire's massive and pervasive impress upon Britain itself, and those adopting a more sceptical and limited appraisal of its impact. Yet there is a degree to which both maximalists and minimalists, as they have been called, miss a significant point – it is the *unevenness* of empire's impact on Britain that is striking and curious. Thus, it is easy to detect imperial motifs in *some* nineteenth-century London architecture, but when the houses of

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.



parliament were rebuilt in the 1840s and '50s, and a wide range of patriotic frescos and sculptures were commissioned for the interiors, only a single representation of an imperial episode was initially included in this most iconic new construction. Instead, the designers – and the British politicians advising them – went for images drawn from domestic and European history or biblical subjects. Only in the early twentieth century, when the empire was facing serious pressure, did Westminster acquire its current overseas imperial iconography.

By the same token, J. R. Seeley claimed that his reason for delivering his influential set of Cambridge lectures on the British Empire, and then publishing them as *The Expansion of England* (1883), was that most of his scholarly peers were still concentrating on exclusively domestic events. Analyses of early and mid-Victorian school and university syllabi and textbooks bear this out. Seeley felt obliged to insist that "the history of England is not in England but in America and Asia," precisely because this was at odds with prevailing views and

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

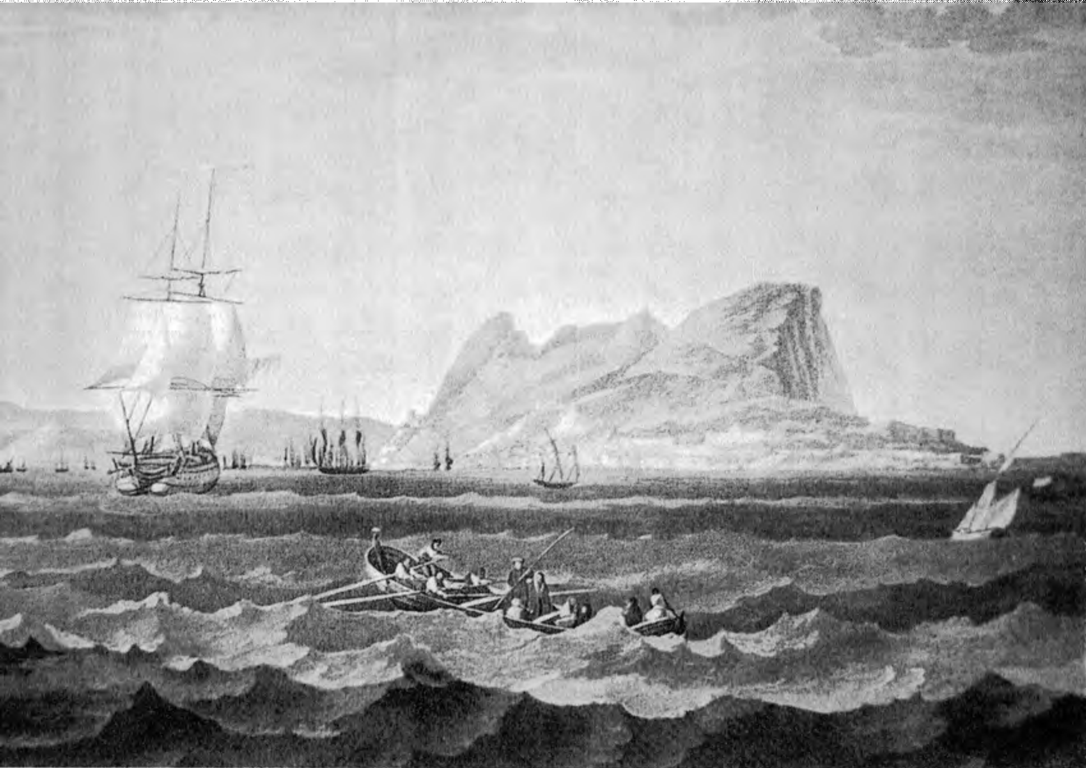
The attack on Seringapatam, 4 May 1799: as the British finally take the capital of Tipu Sultan of Mysore, the entire Indian subcontinent comes within their grasp.

interpretations. In much the same way, Lord Curzon, a devoted imperialist and Viceroy of India from 1899 to 1905, regularly complained in private letters as well as public speeches about the limited understanding and knowledge of the empire displayed by many in Britain's political class. Outside it, evidence of ignorance and unconcern could be still more apparent. Although the British had "absorbed a quarter of the earth," George Orwell remarked, at home they were a markedly gentle people, only intermittently stirred by "conquests or military 'glory.'"

Such observations could be multiplied many times over. At the selfsame time as large parts of the world were being coloured red on the maps, many (not all) Britons, like many (not all) Americans now, seemed markedly unaware and sometimes strikingly insular. Why?

One reason is that such behaviour was not as paradoxical as it may appear. Most Britons at this time had limited opportunities for education, literacy, and travel, and a concentration on European affairs also

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.



Possession of Gibraltar enabled the British to stand between the French naval fleets based on the Atlantic and the Mediterranean, and of course to remain a thorn in the side of the Spanish nation – to this day.

contributed to making many of them only sporadically aware of imperial matters; this was especially true before the late nineteenth century. But there was also a more sinister force at play. As Joseph Conrad famously observed in *Heart of Darkness* (1902), empire is frequently "not a pretty thing when you look into it too much." Consequently, some Britons in the past – and, it might be argued, some Americans now – chose not to look too closely at their polity's global role.

But this attitude – turning away and holding aloof from empire – among *some* Britons in the past was prompted by more than ignorance, introversion, and wilful amnesia: individuals also reacted this way because of the difficulties that empire almost invariably posed. As far as Britons were concerned, implementing empire always involved a substantial expenditure of money, time, energy, and lives. Empire could also inflict strains on British ideals, habits, and customary identities.

Consequently, anti-imperialists in Britain tended to focus over the centuries less on the violence and disruption that the British periodi-

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

cally inflicted on other peoples than on the various costs that empire was inflicting upon its own. Thus Josiah Tucker and many others attacked colonization for robbing Britain of essential population, especially its young and productive males. Adam Smith and Richard Cobden argued that the military and fiscal costs of empire outweighed its commercial benefits, since all that British commerce required was free trade, not captive markets or labour. Both Karl Marx and J.A. Hobson insisted that, however much Britain's empire enriched some financiers and plutocrats, it represented a burden on ordinary taxpayers and diverted too much investment abroad, a thesis that has been endorsed by some recent historians. It is a sign of the times that similar arguments are now surfacing on the American side of the Atlantic. Chalmers Johnson recently claimed that US sponsorship of East Asian satellites like Taiwan, and their export economies, has helped wreak havoc on onetime heavy industry centres like Birmingham, Alabama, and Pittsburgh. How far this is actually the case can be disputed: what is interesting is that, yet again, but on another shore, the argument is being advanced that a polity's global strategies can sometimes sit uneasily with the domestic welfare of sectors of its own metropolitan population.

But the difficulties and strains of empire have never been simply material. Imperialism and nationalism are intimately related, but states engaging in the former have frequently found their national self-imaginings coming under pressure in the process. David Armitage has described some of the contortions British political writers were obliged to adopt in order to reconcile their country's vaunted commitment to liberty and anti-militarism with its actual history of avaricious global interventions. British apologists were compelled to argue – long after it was demonstrably not the case – that their empire was essentially maritime and commercial (and consequently benign), not land-grabbing and militarily enforced (and therefore oppressive). Insisting upon this illusion was made more urgent by the knowledge that polities that had generated empires perceived as military – notably Spain – had ultimately failed in their imperial ventures and had been weakened at home as a result. Moreover, all classically educated males knew that it was empire that had exhausted and corrupted ancient Rome. Far into the eighteenth century, and after, this intellectual heritage led some Britons to be apprehensive that empire would also undermine them. The most obvious example is Edward Gibbon's *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, written in the wake of

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

European rulers gather for the funeral of England's King Edward VII in 1910. Only a few years later, the clumsy and archaic machinery of empire will push millions of their subjects before the relentlessly efficient machinery of war.

Britain's conquests in the Seven Years War and published during the losing war with the emerging American nation. But the East India Company's advance into India also provoked these sorts of anxieties. "The riches of Asia have been poured in upon us," warned one British aristocrat in 1770: "and have brought with them not only Asiatic luxury, but I fear Asiatic principles of government."

At one level, this was orientalist prejudice, but expressions of concern about empire's possible contamination of the home front were also an acknowledgement of some awkward truths. By the very act of imposing economic, political, cultural, and warlike changes upon others, imperial invaders are themselves caught up in changes that they do not always find congenial. Because their numbers were small, while the territories into which they intruded were often very large, European imperialists were always obliged to accommodate, to some degree, the indigenous elite within their own midst, and the consequences of this could be unsettling.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

As far as the British were concerned, this limited accommodation included – as David Cannadine has shown – fostering indigenous elite involvement in chivalric orders, status systems, and recreations in which the British elite also participated. British imperial officials also incorporated, at different times and in different places, indigenous information networks, cartographic knowledge, legal practices, and modes of government, as well as millions of Indian, African, Chinese, Native American, and Caribbean clerks, policemen, and soldiers. At an individual level, imperial Britons (especially earlier ones) sometimes adopted the aesthetic standards of those they were invading – adopting their art and music, their cuisine, modes of dress, and even their religions.

And then there was sex, and occasionally love. In the 1770s, the East India Company had to revise plans to offer pensions to the widows of British common soldiers in India on discovering that most of these women were Indian. But, as Durba Ghosh demonstrates, the soldiers involved regularly provided in their wills for their Indian companions. When they failed to do so, the latter often used the invaders' courts to extract what was due to them.

Ghosh's work perfectly exemplifies the sort of contradictions at the heart of empire that can make comprehending it – and performing it – so challenging. She shows how the authorities in London in this instance *did* seek to draw clear lines between the treatment of white and non-white soldiers' wives. She also shows how these official policies were compromised by local circumstances and human needs. Her work has another virtue. It illumines the imperial lives of poor Britons as well as Indians, and this is all too rare. For all the efforts now being made to recover the "de-centred" narratives of people without power *among the colonized*, European colonizers themselves are often treated in a more monolithic and overwhelmingly elitist fashion. The main focus remains on "the official mind" – on the discourse of leading political, military, clerical, economic, bureaucratic, and literary actors. These are manifestly very important – but so too is the story of the poor and miscellaneous whites who always made up the majority of European imperial invaders, just as they make up the majority of American overseas invaders today.

As far as many of the British poor were concerned, empire could be as much – or more – about varieties of captivity as it was about profit, pride, and prestige. The scale of the empire meant that there was a persistent need for manpower and settlers, not all of which could be

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

satisfied by volunteers. Instead, and especially before 1850, many of those involved in imperial service were coerced in some way. Convicted British and Irish felons were transported to the Caribbean islands, to the American colonies, and to Australia. Very large numbers of men were pressed into the Royal Navy. Vagrants and the unemployed were periodically swept into the regular army and, before 1857, into the forces of the East India Company. At least some Scottish emigrants (like some who were English) did so because they had been evicted from their smallholdings back home, just as some of the Irish who made up almost half of all white troops in India by 1830 were there because of scant economic prospects on their own island. Well into the twentieth century, poor, orphaned, and illegitimate children were regularly shipped out to the empire (and out of the way).

The involuntary and harsh recruitment of so many individuals into British Empire service helps to account for the seeming paradox with which I began this second section. Great numbers of the poor from the British Isles were perforce intimately caught up over the centuries in imperialism. If those of their kind who remained at home sometimes appeared in denial about the nature of empire, this may well have been because they had good cause to know what it could entail for the likes of them.

III New Empires, New Ways of Seeing Them

DEVOTING SERIOUS CONSIDERATION to the difficulties that empire can pose for its exponents has struck some scholars as inappropriate, even immoral. In one of his last published essays, Edward Said argues that exploring the traumas of imperialists is "unhelpful" because it distracts from "the suffering and dispossession" of the colonized. Yet there is no reason why this should be so, no reason why pursuing the former should in any way prevent or exclude sensitive attention to the latter. Empire has been a vast, diffuse, and recurrent phenomenon. More than anything else, what I am urging is a relentlessly wide-ranging and comparative vision, with uncompromisingly plural approaches.

But there are contemporary as well as historical reasons why the difficulties of making and performing empire require wider recognition. Although much of the best historical scholarship in recent

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

As European nations struggled with their internal problems in the early twentieth century, they became more and more interested in dazzling their citizens with the glory and the "noble purpose" of empire.

decades has stressed the limits and contradictions of imperial power in the past, little of this revisionism has thus far filtered into general public awareness. Instead, as Craig Calhoun remarks:

> Much of the public debate has tended to use empire as a metaphor, either for unlimited power for a state to act arbitrarily [abroad] or for the potential for an imperial state to act as an agent of reform and progress.

Thus, many of those now engaged in debate on America's purported empire either represent it as a "bad thing," because it is presumptuous and invasive, or as a "good thing," because it is a force for global betterment. In both cases, there is a too exclusive concentration on the possibilities of power. Surely it would be more productive to encourage people to develop a more complex and more realistic

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

A Congolese child mutilated by Belgian soldiers: countless innocents were tortured, raped, and killed even as King Leopold accepted accolades for his "civilizing mission."

appreciation of what past overseas and overland invasions have entailed for *all* of those involved – not least because new variations on the theme of empire are likely to be with us in the foreseeable future.

The characterization of the coming world order advanced in Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri's *Empire* (2000) has, with reason, been disputed, but they are right to insist that too much obsessive attention has been devoted in recent years to dead Western European colonial empires, while by contrast not enough thought and enquiry have been allotted to current manifestations of the beast. "Postmodernist and postcolonialist theorists never tire of critiquing and seeking liberation from the past forms of rule and their legacies in the present," Hardt and Negri argue. But:

> We suspect that postmodernist and postcolonialist theories may end up in a dead end because they fail to recognize adequately the contemporary object of critique, that is, they mistake today's real enemy.... What if these theorists are so intent on combating the remnants of a past form of domination that they fail to recognize the new form that is looming over them in the present?

Given the current state of the world, there is something rather eerie – not to say deeply suspect – in what is still the overwhelming emphasis on a certain species of dead European empire. Dead empires mattered in the past, and some of their consequences matter still. But studying and denouncing them is a safe and familiar thing to do. Dead empires cannot strike back anymore. However partial their archives may be, usually they are at least available. By contrast, investigating present-day versions of empire is bound to be more difficult and controversial, and far more challenging to patriotic complacencies. But it is vital.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

A German cartoonist depicts the European colonial project soaking the globe in the blood of its victims.

For it is not just certain aspects of globalization and current American foreign policy (as well as America's past) that should arguably demand the attention of scholars and writers interested in the permutations and persistence of empire. Emerging non-Western empires also clamour for analysis. This is true most conspicuously of China, one of the most successful overland empires of the past, and one that is expanding and mutating still. Like many Americans now, and many Britons during their imperial era, vast numbers of Chinese remain in denial about their empire. To be sure, the Revolution of 1911 formally dismantled the old Qing imperial system. But almost immediately Mongolia, Tibet, and Qinghai were identified as integral parts of the new Chinese "nation," even though these territories are historically recent additions to the empire created by the Manchus. Like their imperial predecessors, the rulers of the People's Republic of China have been ruthless in repressing independence movements within their own perceived borders. They have pursued a policy of harsh assimilation in Tibet and sponsored mass Chinese immigration

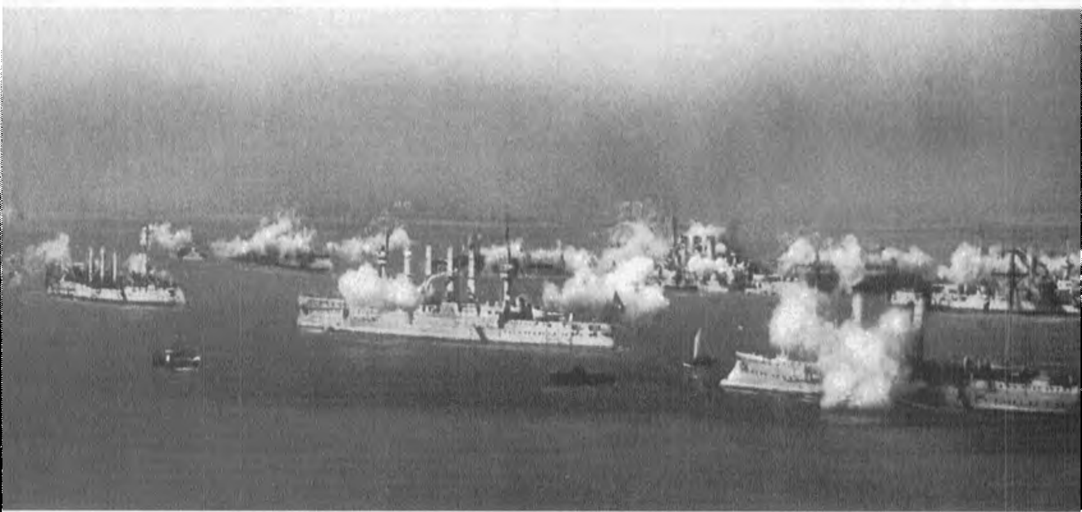
Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

and cultural impositions there; they continue to look impatiently towards Taiwan and to various islands in the South China Sea and even (some would say) to South Korea. Yet in terms of its official mythologies, China was simply a victim of Western and Japanese imperialism (which it was), not a practitioner of imperialism in the present (which it is).

The case of China today returns me to an earlier point: the relative ease with which successful overland empires can segue in public – and even in scholarly estimation – into apparently uncontroversial nation-states. In recent years, the study of nations and nationalism has receded in the face of the vogue for transnational, global history, of which the present interest in empire is a part. Yet it is not just nationalism and imperialism as ideologies that historically have had such an incestuous relationship; the same is true of nations on the one hand and empires on the other. Empires and nations are commonly treated, especially in public discourse, as distinct, even antipathetic political entities.

YET in the early twenty-first century, as in earlier centuries, the boundaries between self-declared nation-states and imperial-type polities, both in terms of how the former are constructed and how they conduct themselves, can be porous and unstable, and this needs wider recognition and analysis. And here is yet another reason why it is vital to think about empire in as adventurous, comprehensive, enquiring, and historically literate a fashion as possible.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.



During the first decade of the twentieth century, the German navy engaged in a massive arms race with Britain, striving to build more and more Dreadnought-class battleships. During a time of unprecedented peace, the two empires frantically poured their respective national treasures into their navies.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.