

Brave New World: Imperial and Democratic Nation-Building in Britain between the Wars

Review Number:

1418

Publish date:

Thursday, 16 May, 2013

Editor:

Laura Beers

Geraint Thomas

ISBN:

9781905165582

Date of Publication:

2012

Price:

£40.00

Pages:

288pp.

Publisher:

Institute of Historical Research

Publisher url:

http://store.london.ac.uk/browse/extra_info.asp?compid=1&modid=1&prodid=508&deptid=158&catid=101&prodva

Place of Publication:

London

Reviewer:

Christopher Hilliard

Brave New World is the latest in a sequence of reflections on the historiography of Britain between the two world wars and the directions future research might go in. Several of the other appraisals were prompted by the publication in 2010 of Ross McKibbin's *Parties and People: England, 1914–1951*, the long-awaited complement to 1998's *Classes and Cultures: England, 1918–1951*, a social and cultural history with a strong political-history undertow.⁽¹⁾ There was a roundtable on *Parties and People* in the journal *Twentieth Century British History*, and the book served as a springboard for Helen McCarthy's historiographical review on inter-war Britain in the *Historical Journal* in 2012.⁽²⁾ McKibbin contributes a preface to Laura Beers and Geraint Thomas's wide-ranging collection of thickly researched and articulately argued essays on the period (in the process he summarizes the contents of the book far better than I can). The title of the 2009 conference from which the volume hatched, 'Unconventional Wisdoms: New Research in the History of Inter-War Britain', both alluded to McKibbin's 1990 essay on the foundations of Conservative hegemony in these years and signalled the arrival of a cohort of new researchers.⁽³⁾ All appear to have been within ten years of their PhDs at the time of the conference; some were still finishing their dissertations.

The national and international politics of the 1920s and 1930s, the period's social history, and its explosion of high-modernist and pop-culture innovations have made inter-war Britain a subject of enduring interest for historians, students, and general readers. Like any field with a lot of talented people working in it, inter-war

Britain reflects much of the diversity of contemporary historical practice. Equally, it also has its own ways of doing things. Work on the cultural history of the 1920s and 1930s is often more inflected by social history sensibilities than comparable work on other periods is. Questions of nation and empire have been less pronounced in the inter-war historiography than in work on other tranches of modern British history. At least, being interested in developments outside the British Isles is not currently a professional obligation for students of the 1920s and 1930s to the extent that it is for scholars working on the 18th or 19th centuries. *Brave New World* is marked by its serious attention to imperial topics alongside ‘domestic’ ones, and by its attempt, at least in the editors’ introduction, to push national identity and ‘nation-building’ to the forefront of the way historians think about the period.

Marc Matera’s chapter is the one that has most in common with the kinds of imperial or transnational history flourishing in the study of other periods. Matera’s focus is on the 1935 film *Sanders of the River*, an imperial epic whose hero is a charismatic but stable colonial administrator. The film was shot in London with Paul Robeson starring as the most important African character. Many of the African students and unattached intellectuals then living in London appeared as extras. Matera sensitively describes Robeson’s own education about Africa during the production and reconstructs the debate about the film and its political implications in the ‘alternative black public sphere’ of 1930s London (p. 239).

In his introduction Matera emphasizes the contribution of Tony Ballantyne, Alan Lester and others who have encouraged imperial historians to think in terms of ‘networks’ or ‘webs’ and eschew what Matera calls ‘the traditional focus on the metropole and its relations with the colonies’ (p. 229). There were always limits to that tradition, though. If you were an imperial historian working through the Colonial Office files on ‘your’ colony then yes, that sort of metropolitan focus was often axiomatic. But a good deal of the history of the empire’s constituent parts has long been written by historians of and/or in the colonies, rather than ‘imperial history’ in the PRO-bound tradition to which Matera is alluding. For those colonial historians, the metropole-periphery question often seemed beside the point – or a ready-made historiographical framework with which they could assert the wider relevance of their subject, not always with great interpretative payoffs. Matera’s essay instances a different kind of positioning that is not uncommon in the recent cultural historiography of empire, invoking political and economic claims about the nature of empire (from Frederick Cooper, for instance) to establish the significance of a cultural or intellectual history project quite different from those of the theoretical or historiographical exemplars. To follow C. L. Innes and Elleke Boehmer in characterizing London as the capital of resistance to empire as well as the capital of the empire (see pp. 233–4) is not necessarily to reinstate that ‘traditional’ metropolitan focus, but it is to conceive of resistance in largely intellectual-history terms.

Priya Satia’s chapter keeps the economic and political – and, above all, military – workings of empire at the forefront. Revisiting her earlier work on air control and espionage in Britain’s imperium in the Middle East, Satia borrows from Robert Proctor the idea of ‘agnotology’, the concerted ‘production of ignorance’ (p. 210). The inter-war period’s realization of mass democracy in Britain was contemporaneous with ‘the rise of the foreign policy expert’, both as public intellectual and as shadowy deal-maker. Satia surveys the covert or unaccountable operations of ‘agent-bureaucrats’ such as Gertrude Bell and St John Philby and then examines attempts in the press to get at what government agents were actually doing in the Middle East. Mention of Kim Philby’s father calls to mind the class aspects of the apparatus of secrecy, with its uneasy combination of a ‘gentlemanly’ code and the legislative controls introduced in 1889 and 1911 as the civil service expanded and had to hire non-gentlemen. Satia does not really pursue the class question. The great strength of her chapter is the way it suggests ‘a new way of thinking about the controversial question of whether Britain was an “imperial society”’ (p. 224). Treating how much Britons knew about their empire as a gauge of popular commitment to empire, as Bernard Porter did in *The Absent-Minded Imperialists*, might be beside the point.⁽⁴⁾ ‘It could even be’, Satia writes, ‘that the essence of a truly “imperial society” lies in the comfortable combination of ignorance with popular imperial culture—and not only in times of covert empire when the cultivation of ignorance is an important government activity’ (p. 224).

Satia’s chapter connects with several of the others. Gary Love’s contribution deals with one of the critics of executive secrecy discussed in Satia’s chapter: the belletristic historian, sometime Conservative MP, and

devotee of the British constitution J. A. R. Marriott. Marriott was worried about the reign of the expert and the transfer of power from Westminster to Whitehall as the reach and complexity of government grew. Love surveys Marriott's many publications and shows how he had the ear of some Tories and Liberals in the 1930s, though it is less clear how much political substance they extracted from his ideas. Where Satia deals with the walls between citizens and foreign policy, Ellen Boucher investigates the ways non-governmental organizations opened up a space for engagement with international politics. Boucher's focus is on the Save the Children Fund in the years immediately following the First World War. In these early years the organization's main concern was children in Germany and Austria. The focus on individual children, and not the communities from which they came, made it possible for SCF to 'draw potential donors' attention away from the divisions of the war and towards the realities of the post-war European crisis' (p. 175). This is a history of popular – and practical – internationalism that complements McCarthy's work on the League of Nations union. It is also an original study of the construction of a public for humanitarian action, of the ways identification with the figure of the suffering child could mobilize different constituencies.

Save the Children's founders were the sisters Eglantyne Jebb and Dorothy Buxton, Oxbridge-educated daughters of a Liberal family. They came up through the milieu of settlement houses, reformist social research, and the Charity Organisation Society, the self-help roots of which often put it in tension with the Fabian Society, which of course was another route to internationalism. Aaron Windel's contribution follows Fabians' cooperative projects from 'Rochdale grocery co-ops' to initiatives in India and Africa, especially during the Labour government of 1929–31, when Sidney Webb (ennobled as Lord Passfield) was secretary of state for the colonies. Passfield's chief collaborator in this was Charles Francis Strickland, a lifer in the Indian civil service. Together they sought to introduce co-operative methods developed in India to farming in African territories that were subject to 'indirect rule'. As 'a hybrid between ancient community values and modern economics', co-operatives could augment the welfare provision of indigenous institutions and render the social change wrought by the cash economy more gradual and less disruptive (p. 257). Co-operatives would induct indigenous peoples into modern Western economic life – a classic piece of 'trusteeship' thinking. The fact that it was thwarted by 'the structural barriers to land and resources for Africans' was also in keeping with the idea of trusteeship, which, as Windel shrewdly observes, 'as a theory of statecraft seemed to turn every structural problem into a question of education' (p. 268).

Brave New World thus registers the impact of the imperial and transnational turns in British history. A related impulse, the identification and interrogation of assumptions about national identity or national particularity that often pass unnoticed, is less in evidence here. This is despite the editors' stress on nation-building and their declaration (at the end of the introduction) that the essays in *Brave New World* 'reassert the centrality and complexity of national identity in defining the history of inter-war Britain' (p. 38). At times (e.g. p. 16), 'nation-building' seems practically synonymous with 'social change'. Thinking in terms of 'the nation' and 'nation-building' makes more sense when we are talking about the media, political rhetoric (see, e.g., pp. 9–12), or the efforts to create a sort of Round Table of British and Dominion universities that Tamson Pietsch examines in this volume, than it does when dealing with other subjects. Lucy Delap does not have very much use for these categories in her discussion of women preachers, female ordination, and expectations of wifely behaviour in the Church of England. Daniel Ussishkin's chapter on psychology and theories of industrial management is concerned with attempts to produce 'a harmonious mass-democratic polity' (p. 108), but he resists the temptation to make this a story 'about' national identity.

Geraint Thomas's chapter is the one most substantively concerned with nation-building. It brims with ideas and fresh material, and it is not an easy chapter to summarize. Thomas is concerned, above all, with the role of constituency and regional party organizations in an age when the major parties' central bodies had increasingly sophisticated and pervasive means of communicating with voters and organizing campaigning. Thomas's case studies of Birmingham and Ilford show the continuing importance of local party organizations (and their publications) in the 1930s, and bring out how 'material' considerations often peculiar to localities affected the fortunes of the parties in national politics. Thomas contends that an 'interest-based rational politics is one of the most under-appreciated results of "the rise of Labour"'. The party 'was often effective at tailoring its campaigns to local needs, rooting its discourse in voters' material

interests'. In suburban Ilford, 'the party made a decent fist of posing as the disinterested defender of consumers in an economy rife with profiteering'; worries about profiteering (in food, in rental properties, in public transport) were shared by working- and middle-class voters in the area (p. 56). Thomas's discussion of these questions of local organizing and local governance is complemented by a discussion of 'Political nation-building from the centre' – the head offices' rhetorical efforts and forays into social psychology. Like Ussishkin and Windel, Thomas is interested in the disciplines and technologies used to organize society and politics.

Arguably the most significant of those technologies, in a polity where the electorate nearly tripled at the end of the First World War and then grew again with the enfranchisement of younger women in 1928, was mass communication. *Brave New World* includes contributions by the two leading media historians of inter-war Britain, Beers and Adrian Bingham. Beers' chapter is an acutely perceptive study of women and the press that moves adeptly between the structural shifts forced by women's suffrage and the sorts of comportment expected of female MPs. The heart of the chapter is a case study of the Labour MP Ellen Wilkinson's efforts to bend patronizing press interest in her personal life and her hairstyle to political advantage. The 'personal' treatment applied to female politicians 'ultimately had a broader reach', affecting coverage of men as well: 'stereotypes and assumptions about women's relationship to politics (however superficial, or downright false) encouraged a greater reliance on personality and appearance in political campaigns and reporting in the inter-war period that contributed to a broader restructuring of the relationship between politicians and the democratic nation' (pp. 147–8). Beers's chapter exemplifies, and extends, a tradition in inter-war scholarship of linking political history and cultural history more tightly than is the case in many fields – a link that is also evident throughout this book in the numerous references (by Beers, Thomas, Delap, and Boucher, for instance) to *Forever England*, Alison Light's 1991 book on women's writing and the sensibilities of the inter-war middle class, a work of literary criticism with a matchless historical sensibility.⁽⁵⁾

Bingham's chapter, like Beers's, sits at the intersection of political history and media history. Bingham's subject is the revitalization of the *Daily Mirror* in the second half of the 1930s. The new regime under Cecil King and H. G. Bartholomew, supported by writers and editors who included Hugh Cudlipp, Basil Nicholson, and the future 'star columnist' William Connor ('Cassandra'), rebuilt the *Mirror* as a new kind of working-class paper. The new *Mirror* reflected the 'democratic instincts of a reform-minded editorial team' and the 'insights of American commerce' – Bartholomew commissioned strategic advice from the US advertising agency J. Walter Thompson, and Connor had been a copywriter for the same agency (p. 115). Bingham shows how, despite the low number of column inches devoted to political news, the paper crystallized disaffection with the National Government and began to articulate a populist left alternative. In making this case, Bingham emphasizes the importance of the paper's down-the-pub common-sense idiom as well as its policy positions. Here, perhaps, is another connection between the cultural historiography of the inter-war period and its political historiography, which, in the work of practitioners such as Jon Lawrence and Laura Beers herself, has shown how much there is to be gained by focusing on process. Bingham's chapter provides a reminder that the social 'work' of mass culture is performed through style, tone, and idiom as well as through more overtly legible 'messages'.

Notes

1. Ross McKibbin, *Parties and People: England, 1914–1951* (Oxford, 2010); McKibbin, *Classes and Cultures: England, 1918–1951* (Oxford, 1998).[Back to \(1\)](#)
2. Steven Fielding, Susan Pedersen, and Philip Williamson, 'Roundtable' on McKibbin, *Parties and People, Twentieth Century British History*, 21 (2010), 558–67; Helen McCarthy, 'Whose democracy? Histories of British political culture between the wars', *Historical Journal*, 55 (2012): 221–38.[Back to \(2\)](#)
3. Ross McKibbin, 'Class and conventional wisdom: the Conservative Party and the "public" in inter-war Britain', in McKibbin, *The Ideologies of Class: Social Relations in Britain, 1880–1950* (Oxford, 1990), pp. 259–93.[Back to \(3\)](#)
4. Bernard Porter, *The Absent-Minded Imperialists: Empire, Society, and Culture in Britain* (Oxford,

2004).[Back to \(4\)](#)

5. Alison Light, *Forever England: Femininity, Literature, and Conservatism between the Wars* (London, 1991).[Back to 5](#)

The editors are happy to accept this review and do not wish to respond.

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