

Visions of Empire: Patriotism, Popular Culture and the City 1870-1939

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This year witnesses the publication of the 100th monograph in the *Studies in Imperialism* series published by Manchester University Press and edited by John Mackenzie. Over the last 30 years this series has offered important investigations of imperialism in all its manifestations: from intellectual thinking about Empire, to women's organisations which promoted Empire links, through to representations of Empire at international exhibitions and, more recently, post-colonial studies of settler society, to name just a few. Indeed, this series must have to be ranked as one of the most successful, measured by both its longevity and the quality of the monographs issued. One might think that a series which is shortly to enter its fourth decade might be showing signs of flagging, but is this the case? On the evidence of Beaven's book, the answer is most certainly in the negative. The framework and argument offered in this book is relatively simple. Taking three English cities located in the north, the midlands and the south, the author examines the ways in which imperial identity was filtered through the prism of the 'local'.

It is surprising to think that this kind of approach has been relatively hard to locate to any great extent before and that the study of the interplay between the urban and the imperial is still in comparative infancy. 50 years ago, in his book *Victorian Cities*, Asa Briggs argued for the special path of urban development of each of the British/British world cities he selected. Briggs showed that the nature of the local economy played a significant role in influencing the trajectory of the city through the 19th century, both in terms of class relations and the profile of the urban elite who governed.⁽¹⁾ He stopped short, however, of explicitly

addressing the imperial dimension of the cities he selected. One might have thought that Briggs' study would have been the prelude to multiple investigations of imperial culture in British cities, but for some reason this did not happen. It might perhaps be explained by the fact that having given up their Empire by the 1960s, British academia forgot about it. The Robinson-Gallagher thesis of the partition of Africa published in that decade put forward the view that the British were drawn in as consequence of peripheral local crises, rather than an intentional metropolitan 'push'. The acquisition of Empire was embarrassing but unintentional.

By the 1970s and 1980s, influenced by the work of Edward Said, post-colonial themes came to the fore. Much of the more conventional imperial history that was written tended to focus on the political and the economic. Perhaps the most significant research in the field of imperial history to appear in the 1980s and early 1990s was that of Anthony Hopkins and Peter Cain, who examined the rise of what they termed 'gentlemanly capitalism' and the financing of Empire (both formal and informal) by the city of London, a study which chimed with the de-regulation of the Square Mile in Thatcher's Britain.⁽²⁾ London, of course, only really appeared here as a home to financial institutions that invested overseas. When historians wanted to footnote opinions of Empire at home in the later 19th century they invariably cited Richard Price.⁽³⁾ This book has been widely referenced since the time of its publication, but it has to be said that its central thesis of working-class indifference to Empire was in need of re-evaluation. Did this book really represent the final word on the matter? In recent years there have been a few studies which have re-ignited interest in imperial history and the role of the British city in imperial affairs. *Imperial Cities*, edited by Felix Driver and David Gilbert, another in the Manchester series, contained work on Empire in Glasgow and London. It was not, however, a book devoted solely to the British Empire. More recently still, the same series published an edited collection on Liverpool's experience of Empire, with the essays in this volume covering both the early modern and modern periods.⁽⁴⁾ We should also not forget the two-volumed project led by Jay Winter and Jean Louis Robert on *Capital Cities at War*, which focused on three European capital cities (London, Berlin and Paris) and the impact that the First World War had on them.⁽⁵⁾ In the 2000s the debate on the impact of Empire on domestic culture tended to polarise between those who thought that Empire had very little impact on British popular culture and those who argued for a high awareness of the wider British world.⁽⁶⁾

Steering a line between these two poles, Beaven's book is, at a number of levels, both timely and welcome. The author begins his study by setting his three chosen cities, Portsmouth, Coventry and Leeds, in context; describing the imperial interests of leading local politicians in the later 19th century and the economic profile of the three. He also notes a significant development in the nature of the local press at the same time. Here, a popular Conservatism began to celebrate the achievements of the city in areas like sport and business and then link the city's fortunes to the wider Empire. Urban elites were therefore provided with a forum to boost their city in a way that would not have been possible in a less democratic era (pre-1870) when a more staid daily press was in place. The new journalism's role in the boosting of imperial affairs and the local role in these events first came to the fore on the outbreak of the South African War in 1899–1902.

It is evident that it was when citizens felt they were fighting for their city's pride that they were most likely to volunteer for imperial wars. The press both created and responded to this feeling. An example of this was the use by the *Midland Daily Telegraph* (first published in 1891 and a Tory paper by 1897) of a Coventry-built car to travel around the city in order to proclaim the Relief of Ladysmith in 1900 to residents. In Beaven's other two case examples similar processes were at work to link the imperial and the local. Greatest interest was shown by the press in the context of the Boer War in those men who had volunteered from the city, rather than the wider county. In a reverse process, news of city affairs was welcomed by troops in the theaters of war.

On the outbreak of the First World War, the immediate reaction of city papers was to look to their own city's fortunes and condition. Concerns were raised about the effect of war on the local economy. In Coventry, Siegfried Bettman, a German-born Jew, naturalised as British in 1895, held the position of Mayor. Initially praised, on the war's outbreak, attitudes swiftly changed. Local and national papers doubted his patriotism and he was hounded from office by the autumn of 1914. His replacement, Councillor Pridmore, was

Coventry-born and the local press was confident that this fact would encourage men to enlist. The recruitment drives that took place in 1914 and 1915 played on a number of 'identities' that elites felt might trigger large-scale enlistment. Of those utilised, Beaven shows that it was invariably the idea of fighting for the 'local' that saw the greatest success, although recruitment was more effective amongst the middle class (pals battalions) than the working class. This is effectively demonstrated by means of a table on page 111. The author also notes a second factor which accounted for higher enrolment rates, namely when recruitment rallies were staged after local employers had laid large numbers of men off work. Explanations for the failure of recruitment often pinned blame on migrants such as the Jewish community of Leeds or militant workers in Coventry.

In another early chapter Beaven looks at the way that fears of London's East End were projected onto his chosen cities' slum areas. Portsmouth most closely resembled London, witnessing clerical investigation of poverty and degeneration and the establishment of settlements to aid the poor. This process was least in evidence in Coventry – a later 19th-century boom town which, whilst containing slum areas, did not generate similar journalistic expose. One reason for this was that, unlike London, all three provincial cities were governed by an urban elite who defended the city from critics. In subsequent chapters Beaven explores the introduction of Empire Day in each city, the ways in which school children were educated in imperial values and the staging of the 1924–5 Empire Exhibition in London and the way each city made sense of that event by stressing the 'local'. Perhaps not surprisingly, given that the city was home to the Royal Navy, it was in Portsmouth that children received the largest doses of imperial education. The education system in Coventry and Leeds tended to focus on producing disciplined children for work in the engineering or textile industries. Empire Day was often used in the English city context as a tool for projecting at, to use post-modern parlance, the 'other'. This went to an extreme in Leeds, such that it was commonly thought to be a day for the Jews in the city. Lord Meath's (the architect of Empire Day) vision for uniformity, as far as celebrations were concerned was thus never realised, as Empire Day was invariably adapted to the local. The case of Beryl Aylward is analysed in some depth by the author. Aylward, a Coventry teacher, was suspended in the 1930s when she objected to participating in Empire Day celebrations due to her Quaker beliefs. She was reinstated after public protest. The incident demonstrates how 'political' the celebrations had become by the inter-war period. It would be interesting to know if this was an isolated example, or whether this episode was replicated in either of the other two cities. The narrative suggests it was unique.

In the final chapter Beaven turns his attentions to popular entertainments in the three cities. Theatre owners realised that imperial events could be put 'on the bill'. Most obviously, songs and acts integrated Empire into their performance. The programmes even incorporated announcements of imperial events, if news broke out during a performance. In each city celebrations after such news often took a rather different form. The orchestration of Empire by both civic elites and the city press was a significant feature of this period, reactions in each of the three cities having been largely conditioned by the framework of later 19th century civic culture. Such was the nature of Empire, that important news invariably broke overnight and too early for the British morning papers to report, so it was the evening papers which first achieved a news 'scoop' from distant areas of the British world, adding to their importance in city affairs.

Overall, this book will surely be valuable for urban and imperial historians. It demonstrates that Empire did mean something to the working class, but only at certain times and in certain contexts. It is a study which shows how regionalised England was in the period under scrutiny and, for those with an interest in the wider Empire, how different this was to the experience of other parts of the British world (for example, Australasia), where regional differences were far less pronounced. Regionalism in England led to significant differences in the way imperial identity played out amongst city populations. This is therefore a rather more subtle interpretation of working-class attitudes than provided by Price and it also opens up some interesting lines of inquiry for future researchers. Military tribunals, for example, are not covered here and might be investigated for their local dimension. The ownership of skill was often the deciding factor in whether men were conscripted or exempted from fighting from later 1916 up to the end of the war and definitions varied from region to region. Whilst the 'political' is not the primary focus here, it would be interesting to see how far imperial issues were to the fore in local and national elections in these cities over the period 1870–1939.

Quantitative studies of how much imperial news any particular city was getting from its press might also be undertaken. What happened when a Conservative paper was not established in a city? Was Empire projected in different ways as a result? This book suggests that broad, 'nationalistic' readings of Empire need to be supplemented by studies of the urban and rural communities that, taken as a whole, constituted the patchwork nation-state in its tangible rather than imagined form.

Notes

1. A. Briggs, *Victorian Cities* (Harmondsworth, 1968).[Back to \(1\)](#)
2. A number of articles by the authors preceded this two-volume study: Anthony Hopkins and Peter Cain, *British Imperialism: Innovation and Expansion 1688–1914* and *British Imperialism: Crises and Deconstruction 1914-1990* (London, 1993).[Back to \(2\)](#)
3. R. Price. *An Imperial War and the British Working Class: Working Class Attitudes and Reactions to the Boer War 1899-1902* (London, 1972).[Back to \(3\)](#)
4. *Imperial Cities: Landscape, Display and Identity*, ed. F. Driver and D. Gilbert (Manchester, 1999); *Empire in One City? Liverpool's Inconvenient Imperial Past*, ed. S. Haggerty, A. Webster and N. J. White (Manchester, 2008).[Back to \(4\)](#)
5. J. Winter and J-L Robert, *Capital Cities at War: Paris London Berlin. Vol. 1* (Cambridge, 1997); *Capital Cities at War: Paris, London, Berlin 1914-1919. Vol. 2. A Cultural History* (Cambridge, 2007).[Back to \(5\)](#)
6. For example B. Porter, *The Absent Minded Imperialists: Empire Society and Culture in Britain* (Oxford, 2003) and *At Home With the Empire: Metropolitan Culture and the Imperial World*, ed. C. Hall and S. O. Rose (Cambridge, 2006).[Back to \(6\)](#)

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