

Ornamentalism: How the British Saw their Empire

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This book is committed to two main propositions, one general and one more particular. The general proposition is one with which it is hard to envisage serious disagreement, but for which David Cannadine is kind enough to invoke my imprimatur (among other much more weighty ones): the history of the British empire and the history of Britain itself are inseparable and must be studied as a seamless whole. The particular proposition is that in the high days of British imperialism, that is from about 1850 to about 1950, the history of the empire and that of Britain were brought together by a British commitment to reproduce overseas the kind of hierarchical society that, Cannadine believes, existed in Britain.

In his *Class in Britain* of 1998, Cannadine argued the case for analysing modern British society in terms of complex, 'layered, interlocking' hierarchies rather than by using a simple division between rich and poor or a three-tier class structure. In extending that argument to the empire, he is particularly concerned to reduce the significance of another great binary divide that has, he believes, exercised an undue influence on historians. This is the division between 'us' and 'them'. Cannadine argues that in trying to relate their non-European subjects to themselves, imperially minded British people were not much inclined to indulge in sweeping generalisations about difference. They did not construct generic 'others' by which they defined themselves. In particular, they did not use denigration of 'enervated, hierarchical, corporatist, backward' Africans or Asians to highlight a 'dynamic, individualistic, egalitarian, modernizing' Britain (p. 4). They did not do such a thing principally because they did not conceive Britain in those terms. They saw it as traditional and hierarchical in its own way. Although he concedes that generalisations based on assumptions of racial superiority and inferiority were widely and stridently used in the late nineteenth century, Cannadine insists that such generalisations did not displace ways of looking at non-European societies that stressed similarities rather than immutable differences. Hierarchies could be detected that seemed to be similar to the structure of

British society. The king of Hawaii ranked above the crown prince of imperial Germany. Aristocracies in Africa or Asia should be accorded some of the respect due to the British aristocracy. The great mass of such populations was regarded with disdain, but then so were the urban and rural poor in Britain itself.

In the full statement of his theme in the chapter called 'Perspectives', Cannadine, for all his unfailing courtesy to individual named scholars, fires off a canister of grape shot into the serried ranks of anonymous historians and others who seek to 'approach and recover' the past 'through the stereotypical and unequal collectivities' of race, class or gender (pp. 125-6). He urges those who see race as determining all to reflect that 'past societies and empires, predicated on individual inequality, had ways of dealing with race that contemporary societies, dedicated to collective equality, do not' (p. 126).

'Ornamentalism' is the term that Cannadine has coined to describe the outward and visible effects of attempts to order the empire by binding its hierarchies together. '[O]rnamentalism was hierarchy made visible, immanent and actual. . . [C]hivalry and ceremony, monarchy and majesty, were the means by which this vast world was brought together, interconnected, unified and sacralized' (p. 122). Monarchy was elevated into the great unifying force of empire. All the hierarchies of the empire were to find their culmination in direct allegiance to the monarch. The person of the monarch was made accessible to them through his or her occasional presence among them - George V's appearance at the Coronation Durbar in India, was followed by the more extensive travels of George VI and the present Queen - or, much more frequently, by tours by royal princes representing the monarch. An increasing degree of pomp was accorded to the office of the monarch's permanently resident representative, be it a viceroy, a governor general or a governor, holding his court in a palatial government house. Where they could be identified, existing indigenous aristocracies, Indian princes, Malay sultans, Fijian or African chiefs, were incorporated into the imperial system. The new mandated territories in the Middle East were treated as client kingdoms. Elsewhere, colonial peerages were contemplated from time to time. Patronage was extended to colonial gentlemen in Australia, New Zealand or Canada, who were listed in *Burke's Colonial Gentry*. Elaborate systems of honours were devised to cement the system. The 'most successful British proconsuls and imperial soldiers' became 'veritable walking Christmas trees of stars and collars, medals and sashes, ermine robes and coronets' (p. 95).

All this is described in scintillating prose with a fine eye for telling detail. Well-chosen illustrations embellish the text. Cannadine's approach seems to be entirely appropriate. His sense of the ridiculous is never far from the surface, but he never degenerates into condescension. The book will give enormous pleasure.

In a chapter called 'Limitations', Cannadine disarms ill-natured critics by conceding in advance most of the points that they could reasonably make. He admits that he is painting a 'partial (and partisan) picture'. There always was 'a significant gap between theory and practice, intention and accomplishment' (p. 136). In the last resort, whatever was intended, 'the reality of empire was that improvement was inevitable, reform was unavoidable, modernization was inexorable, and progress was irreversible' (pp. 148-9). Nevertheless, *Ornamentalism* has a challenging thesis to propound and it deserves to have serious questions asked of it. There can be no doubt that the beliefs Cannadine expounds were widely held, but how widely? Were they a basis for systematic policy-making? If so, to what extent could such policies be implemented? Are we dealing with fantasy or with purposeful social engineering that had significant consequences?

Cannadine states at the outset that he is concerned with 'the world-view and social presuppositions of those who dominated and ruled the empire' (p. xx); that is with men in power, 'the official mind'. He believes that in the period with which he is concerned 'British officialdom generally' was committed to conservative ideals of cherishing tradition and hierarchy throughout the empire (p. 148). Allowing for a great deal of diversity among governors, members of the Indian Civil Service and of the colonial civil services that were merging into a single Colonial Service, in a general sense this is probably true. Thanks in particular to the indefatigable labours of Anthony Kirk-Greene on the Colonial Service and to numerous studies of the ICS, it seems clear that overseas administrators were overwhelmingly drawn from genteel rural or semi-rural backgrounds, if not usually from directly agrarian ones, that their views about society were likely to be conservative with a small 'c' and that they tended to vote Conservative. Such generalisations have been

substantiated by sophisticated studies of the intellectual assumptions of Indian civil servants, such as those of Clive Dewey. He charts the decline by the 1870s of the utilitarian individualism and free market enthusiasms of the earlier nineteenth century and the rise in their place of an increasing commitment to Indian 'collectivities', such as village communities.⁽¹⁾ The Punjab Land Alienation Act of 1900, intended to protect such communities from the consequences of a free market in land, was a striking example of how such beliefs could be embodied in policy-making. African administrators were also generally committed to preserving rural social structures, not only through the mechanisms of indirect rule. Many African officials tended to be suspicious of trade and urbanisation.⁽²⁾ Enthusiasts for an 'imperial mission' that included being 'a global advertisement for liberal capitalism' may not have been very numerous in either the Indian or the colonial civil services.⁽³⁾

Practical necessity reinforced an inclination to conserve. The great waves of expansion in the late nineteenth century in Africa, Southeast Asia and the Pacific left the British with many new territories to administer and with only limited resources with which to construct an administration. It was therefore natural and inevitable that they should have co-opted such indigenous hierarchies as seemed to be to hand. In the bleak times of the 1920s or the 1930s there seemed to be little alternative to continuing these policies. The same principle applied in the mandated territories of the Middle East, where local partners in rule had urgently to be found to sustain a limited British presence intended merely to maintain certain strategic interests. In India the Raj was on the defensive after 1857, seeking to rebuild bridges with the elites that had apparently turned against it and later trying to enlist their support against nationalism.

Yet conservatism was becoming outmoded rather more quickly than Cannadine perhaps recognises. Contemporaries who could only envisage the late nineteenth-century Raj as 'glittering, ceremonial, layered and traditional, princely and rural, Gothic and Indo-Saracenic' (p. 51) were being myopic in the extreme. India was predominantly rural, but a great human tragedy of the century, not unreasonably called 'a late Victorian holocaust' in a recent book,⁽⁴⁾ was being played out in its countryside in the 1890s, with a mortality from famine and disease that ran to millions. Men like Curzon, for all their obsessions with the trivia of ritual, were in no doubt of what was at stake. They were authoritarians, not out of sentiment, but out of a belief that this was the only way to get things done. Late nineteenth-century India was ground on which the irrigation engineers, the Indian Medical Service, the sanitation authorities and the conservators of forests did battle with dearth, disease and drought, and were not winning.

Most colonial territories lacked the resources to attempt major 'development' projects. Yet even when indirect rule was fully in vogue, it was never intended to be a device for maintaining an unchanging stability. Through indirect rule Africans would progress towards objectives appropriate to them at a speed that would avoid social disruption. Change began after the Second World War. By then the numbers of 'specialists' recruited into the Colonial Service, such as medics, agricultural officers, vets or educationalists, greatly outnumbered the administrators.⁽⁵⁾

In his 'Dissolution' chapter, Cannadine appears to be arguing that hierarchy and empire left the stage together. Yet the British had surely abandoned hierarchy long before they had abandoned empire. The increasing commitment to 'development' is one clear sign of this. Shifting political ideals are another. The Commonwealth was not an inadequate substitute for empire once it had gone (p. 167), but was an alternative imperial strategy that was being deployed long before the end of empire. The commitment to equality of status and free association, admittedly then limited to already self-governing white communities, goes back to 1926. It seemed expedient to successive British governments to extend the scope of the Commonwealth further and further. The monarchy adjusted with remarkable skill to a changing role. Although old elements of hierarchy clearly remained, the sovereign as head of the Commonwealth was a very different phenomenon to the Victoria who had received the homage of her subjects from across the world in London in 1897. At the level of high strategy, the Commonwealth could be regarded either as a tiresome sham, which seems to have been the view of Winston Churchill and may be the view of David Cannadine, or as a ploy for prolonging influence, which was probably the view of most ministers in Britain in the 1950s or 1960s. For Queen Elizabeth, however, equality and free association, seem to be ideals to be cherished. This is now a very outmoded view, no doubt appropriate for a lady of 75, but not for many others. Yet it may be

that many British people even invested empire with these ideals, caring little for hierarchy and never being seduced by Ornamentalism.

These last reflections are in part prompted by the interesting Appendix, 'An Imperial Childhood', in which Cannadine looks back on the impact that empire may have made on him as a young person in Birmingham. He is particularly interesting about his father, who had served in the Royal Engineers in India during the Second World War. David's father regretted the passing of empire, but believed that 'Indians owed their freedom to the British'. He disliked 'the petty regimentation of army life', so presumably was not much taken with Ornamentalism; he admired the supremely un-ornamental Wavell and disliked Mountbatten who may have been too ornamental for his own good (pp. 184-5). These apparently mixed responses are surely characteristic of huge numbers of people of the recent and probably of the more remote past; they certainly resonate with my sense of how a great range of my family responded to service in India. Empire was a fact of life. You either went there in search of a job like any other or because military obligation (as in my case and Mr Cannadine's) compelled you to go there. You accepted its existence and may have invested it with benevolent purposes (if that is not reading too much into Mr Cannadine's belief in 1945 that the empire was giving Indians their freedom). This may have been a triumph of hope over experience. Exposure to empire was an immense widening of horizons, but did not necessarily turn people so exposed into imperial partisans for life. Manifestations of Ornamentalism may have been repugnant to many who had witnessed them, even though the spectacles could be terribly seductive. A police askari band reduced me to tears aged 20 on my last day in Kenya. But in my firmer moments I knew that such things were extraneous to the main business of colonial life of which I had seen a fair amount.

If there is anything to be drawn from this piece of self-indulgence on my part, it may be the conclusion that historians should try to recognise that reactions to empire were extremely diverse across British society and that individuals could have contradictory feelings about it. Cannadine has some wise words on this in his Appendix. He is sceptical whether the British people as a whole were ever in thrall to an 'imperial project' and is sure that no such thing existed in his own lifetime (pp. 197-8). There are, however, some suggestions implying the existence of the kind of binary divide that in other contexts Cannadine properly seeks to discredit. Whether someone accepted Ornamentalism or rejected it seems to be made into a test as to whether they accepted empire or rejected it as 'a Tory racket'. Those who 'governed [empire], collaborated in it and went along with it' are presumed to have wanted a 'fully hierarchical[,] . convincingly homogenised' empire (p. 136). One can beg to differ and to suggest that there were many who 'went along' with empire but may have regarded Ornamentalism as a lot of mumbo-jumbo. Historians have written a great deal about imperial enthusiasts (Cannadine's Ornamentalists are clearly another species of enthusiasts), and a fair amount about the opponents of empire. They rarely write about the great mass who were neither enthusiasts nor critics, but 'went along'.

The subtitle of the book is 'How the British saw their Empire'. Cannadine is therefore overwhelmingly concerned with perceptions and not with the extent to which social hierarchies could be effectively consolidated or even constructed within imperial territories. In his chapter on Limitations he is very willing to concede that human material throughout the imperial world was often extremely resistant to being moulded into hierarchical shapes in the approved British model. Some existing hierarchies, such as caste in India, seemed to common British understanding to put the wrong people on top. Imperial intervention, at least in not preventing the racially determined apportionment of land, could underpin for a time settler gentry in Southern Rhodesia or Kenya. Elsewhere outside South Africa, white farming communities tended to displace indigenous inhabitants rather than to conscript their labour, and then to create generally egalitarian communities based on extensive rather than intensive cultivation of land. In fertile and heavily populated parts of India, Southeast Asia or West Africa, elites who were in control of the land before colonial rule could maintain their hold on it and on the output of those who cultivated it. Paradoxically, the British, even in late nineteenth-century India, were more inclined to intervene on the side the peasant than of the landlord.

It is no part of David Cannadine's brief to prove that the world was remodelled according to British

proscriptions of hierarchy. All that he has to prove is that there was a strong aspiration to do that. This he proves convincingly for most, if not perhaps for all, of his hundred years. In the process he has written a most engaging and informative book. It is not a total explanation of how the British saw their empire, but it does not claim to be. Thanks to this book, the cult of hierarchy will hereafter be given a prominent place among the perspectives devised by British people to try to make sense of their vast empire.

Notes

1. Clive Dewey, *Anglo-Indian Attitudes: The Mind of the Indian Civil Service* (London, 1993); see also his articles, 'The Making of an English Ruling Caste in the Era of Competitive Examination', *English Historical Review*, lxxxvii (1973); 'Images of the Village Community: A Study in Anglo-Indian Ideology' *Modern Asian Studies*, vi, 1972. [Back to \(1\)](#)
2. Cyril Ehrlich, 'Building and Caretaking: Economic Policy in British Tropical Africa', *Economic History Review*, 2nd ser., xxvi (1973). [Back to \(2\)](#)
3. P. J. Cain and A. G. Hopkins, *British Imperialism: Crisis and Deconstruction, 1914-1990* (London, 1993), p. 178. [Back to \(3\)](#)
4. Mike Davis, *Late Victorian Holocausts: El Nino Famines and the Making of the Third World*, (London, 2001). [Back to \(4\)](#)
5. Anthony Kirk-Greene, *On Crown Service: A History of H. M. Colonial and Overseas Civil Services, 1837-1997*, London, 1999, pp. 51-2. [Back to \(5\)](#)

The author is pleased to accept the review and will not be responding further.

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