

A Taste for Empire and Glory: Studies in British Overseas Expansion, 1660-1800

Review Number:

31

Publish date:

Tuesday, 1 July, 1997

Author:

Philip Lawson

ISBN:

9780860786368

Date of Publication:

1997

Price:

£70.00

Pages:

314pp.

Publisher:

Variorum

Publisher url:

http://www.ashgate.com/default.aspx?page=637&calcTitle=1&title_id=2907&edition_id=3372

Place of Publication:

Aldershot and Vermont

Reviewer:

Robert Harris

Philip Lawson died in October 1995 at the comparatively young age of 46. Most of the contents of this volume, which he helped prepare for publication before his death, have been published elsewhere as periodical articles, and a good number will be well known to eighteenth-century scholars. There are two new essays, however, both on the subject of tea and tea drinking in Britain and the colonies in the eighteenth century. These essays allow us a brief glimpse of the project which Lawson was working on towards the end of his life.

Inevitably there are dangers of incoherence and repetition in a collection such as this. Yet the essays and articles do possess a strong coherence - the theme of empire and its diverse manifestations and repercussions provides the common thread - and they gain significantly by being printed and read together. Indeed, those interested in empire and in particular the domestic faces of empire will find much to think on here, as will all eighteenth-century scholars. There is only one decision about content that I would quibble with, which is the inclusion of several review articles. While these contain some interesting remarks, they are of limited interest compared to the articles and essays.

The view offered by this volume of the impact of empire on British politics, perceptions and society in the two decades or so after the Peace of Paris (1763) is wide-ranging. Lawson's intellectual journey around the early British empire took him from an examination, basically Namierite in inspiration, of the career of that

easily underestimated politician, George Grenville, to consideration of the challenge of integrating Canada into the British empire after the Seven Years' War, investigation of the murky and frequently fierce politics surrounding the East India Company, and finally to tea and its important impact on eighteenth-century society. There is also a strong challenge to other historians implicit throughout this work, and explicitly stated in several places - to integrate more fully than has been the case hitherto empire and imperial themes into general accounts of the development of eighteenth-century Britain. The impact of the periphery on the core of the early British empire was profound and far-reaching, as Lawson as well as others - Huw Bowen, Linda Colley, David Hancock, P J Marshall, Allan MacInnes and Kathleen Wilson, to name just a few - have shown in recent years. But what is perhaps equally important about this perception is how far, as Lawson starts to show, it holds out the possibility of connecting together in fruitful and novel ways so many different features of eighteenth-century social, cultural and economic life. Through a new or re-fashioned history of empire, the traditional boundaries of eighteenth-century history can be and are being collapsed. The new history of empire is a history of representation as well as of administration, politics, trade and war. It is also a history that forces the historian to cross boundaries between countries within as well as beyond the British Isles. Moreover, for political historians, like the growing study of the legislative output of the eighteenth-century House of Commons, it provides a way of moving beyond the conceptualization of eighteenth-century political life as being divided between so-called 'high politics' and 'low politics' which has shaped so much writing and research on eighteenth-century British politics since the 1960s. Such developments are in themselves exciting; it is also possible to detect in them the outlines of new perspectives on the continuing debate about what sort of society eighteenth-century Britain was.

Several articles in this volume touch on issues that have long concerned eighteenth-century historians. There is much on the background to the American Revolution, including a rigorous dissection of Grenville's attitudes towards relations with the colonies, which reveals him as much more constructive than his reputation allows. Lawson's close study of Grenville appears to have provided him with a strong sense of the realities of eighteenth-century political life, and the dangers of imposing overly schematic interpretations on it. In one of the review articles, he has interesting things to say about the complex relationship between parliamentary politicians and extra-parliamentary politics, a relationship that has tended to be pushed to the background of discussion in several recent books on popular politics. It is study of Grenville's political career which also appears to have laid the basis for another of the important features of Lawson's scholarship - his ability to look to the East as well as to the Atlantic world in examining empire and imperial themes. There are two articles on the entanglement of the East India Company in politics in the two decades after 1760s; in both Grenville makes a prominent appearance, very much as the practical politician and adept fixer.

Three of the articles are on Canada and the Quebec Act (1774). These bring out very clearly the formidable problems successive British ministers faced after 1763 in integrating the French Catholic population of Quebec into the British empire. Intolerance and suspicion of Catholicism was rife on both sides of the Atlantic; it also did not help that for many Britain's Atlantic empire had a spiritual purpose - to nurture and protect Protestantism. The episode also has a further significance, however, one that, as Lawson suggests, has great importance when it comes to portraying the later eighteenth-century British state and its ruling elites. Through the passage of the Quebec Act, an important blow was struck against the traditional perception that political stability and security depended on Anglican hegemony and limited toleration of orthodox Protestant Dissent. It was Lord North's Solicitor General, Alexander Wedderburn who summed up the new view most succinctly when he observed that 'there is no instance of any state that has been overturned by toleration'. The only limits to toleration were to be set by the security of the state and this was, at bottom, an issue to be decided on pragmatic grounds. The later eighteenth century ruling order was one which felt secure and confident enough to defend its rule in increasingly secular and utilitarian terms. It refurbished its appeal by presenting a rational modernizing face, or, as Elijah Gould has recently put it, 'an appearance of Enlightenment' ('American Independence and Britain's Counter-Revolution', *Past and Present*, 154 (1997), p 138). In the successful defence of their policy towards Canada, we can also see ministers and their supporters reaching towards a doctrine of imperial responsibility that was to become much more clearly expressed a few years later and in relation to India. The full story of the emergence of this doctrine remains

to be told, although Lawson provides plenty of helpful hints.

If there is one dominant theme that runs throughout this volume it is both how pervasive and at the same time how complex a presence empire was in Hanoverian Britain. Those looking for easy characterizations of empire's significance for Britons in the eighteenth century will not find them. Lawson emphasizes in several places that there was no 'unitary vision of empire' in eighteenth-century Britain. The imaginative engagement with empire took place on different levels, and empire possessed a range of overlapping and shifting meanings. Nor was there any great stability about reactions to empire; the emotions and attitudes it gave rise to were inherently unstable and often contradictory. Nor does he provide any support for portrayals of empire in this period which seek to emphasize the primacy of economic motivations. If I read him correctly, he is not denying that imperial expansion depended on the energies, imagination and skills of merchants, traders, manufacturers and investors. And he certainly is not arguing that economic themes did not feature significantly in discussions of empire. What he is emphasizing, however, is how far they were usually subordinated to other factors. As he writes in one place (III, p. 140):

It was ... a brave person who praised the economic motive alone when discussing overseas trade and imperial development. Anyone willing to say that personal or national glory rested solely on obliterating opponents and exploiting settlers in pursuit of profit would not be commentating in a language readily understood by an eighteenth century readership.

Lawson suggests that where commercial themes did tend to predominate was in 'informal' press coverage of empire, in the reports contemporary newspapers carried of, for example, the exploitation of new colonies. Kathleen Wilson has recently talked about the press creating an image of Britain's empire being an 'empire of goods', an empire bound together by multiplying flows of trade and products (Kathleen Wilson, *The Sense of the People: Politics, Culture and Imperialism in England, 1715-1785* (Cambridge, 1995), p 40). Yet what Lawson shows is that this was only one of the images of empire which the press helped to fashion.

To draw too stark a division between commercial issues and other issues that featured in debates about empire, for example, strategic questions and, closely related to these, nationalistic themes would be wrong, and Lawson certainly does not do this. Britain's colonies, particularly in the Caribbean and North America, were usually seen principally in terms of international rivalry. Visions of accumulation and prosperity were secondary to visions of security. This emerges in several places in this volume, especially in a detailed analysis of the debates which surrounded the peace settlement at the end of the Seven Year's War. It is something which can be explained very largely in terms of the persistence and intensity of traditional fears about French power and international aims, another factor which underlines the continuities in the ways in which eighteenth-century Britons debated foreign policy and empire. What is perhaps remarkable (and easily overlooked) is how far these fears continued in the years even after 1763 and the amazing military successes of the latter part of the Seven Year's War. Lawson refers in one place to a 'press war of attrition' (IV, p 585) against French activity and intentions in North America in the decade or so after 1763. There are close parallels here with developments in the later 1740s and early 1750s, when the press conducted a similar campaign against French activities and intentions after the Peace of Aix-La-Chapelle. As one commentator argued in 1756 (*Critical Review*, xiv (1756), pp. 265-6):

Every Briton ought to be acquainted with the ambitious views of France, her eternal thirst after universal dominion, and her continual encroachments on the properties of her neighbours ... nothing but a war, vigorously carried on against her, and continued 'till she be utterly incapacitated for putting her wicked schemes into execution. And till this be done, it is most certain, that our trade, our liberties, our country, nay all the rest of Europe, will be in a continual danger of falling prey to the common Enemy, the universal Cormorant, that would, if possible, swallow up the whole globe itself.

As Lawson points out, ministers such as Grenville, the earl of Egremont and the earl of Halifax were exercised by the spectre of this threat during discussions about the peace settlement at the end of the Seven Year's War. They believed that Britain should hang on to all her conquests as a guarantee against a revival of French power and influence. For many, the shadow of a war of revanche by the French never lifted significantly after 1763, as an examination of press discussions of the breakdown in relations with the American colonists in 1775 would indicate very strongly. Wars for empire were also wars for strategic interests in Europe; in the minds of Britons in the eighteenth century it was impossible to disentangle the two theatres.

If strategic questions closely influenced attitudes towards empire and expansion overseas, what also characterised these was a high measure of uncertainty, anxiety and restraint. There are important differences here between Lawson's portrayal of attitudes towards empire and Kathleen Wilson's recent work on the same topic. But Lawson is able to provide an impressive amount of evidence to support his view. It is also a view that my own research on a slightly earlier period would support (for some preliminary thoughts, see my *"American Idols": War, Empire and Middling Ranks in Mid Eighteenth Century Britain*, Past and Present, 150 (1996), pp. 111-41). Lawson's starting point in many of the articles reprinted here is the mood of optimism and expectation which existed in the early 1760s and the story he is telling in different ways is about how this mood dissipated. It would be possible to characterize this process slightly differently, although this does not weaken Lawson's main point. So far as empire and Britain's role overseas is concerned, the mood of the early 1760s was intrinsically unstable, the product of short-term factors, namely, a series of largely unanticipated and stunning military victories across the globe. It also masked the very characteristics and contradictions which were to become ever more clearly exposed in the years after 1763. For example, attitudes towards imperial expansion were throughout the central decades of the eighteenth century uncertain and often ambiguous. There were also always potential tensions between wars of expansion and commercial needs and interests, in so far as the latter had any unity. It was Walpole who in the 1730s had argued very strongly that it was peace which brought prosperity and, given events in the war against Spain which broke out in October 1739, and as many of his opponents recognised in later years, it was an argument that was difficult to refute, at least for long.

From the early 1760s, it was India's role, as Lawson demonstrates with great clarity in an article written in collaboration with Jim Philips and first published in Albion in 1984, to provide a very visible stage for exposing tensions, contradictions and anxieties surrounding empire. Because of the rapacity and greed of servants of the East India Company, British activities in India also provided a very powerful focus for deep-rooted concerns about the impact of expansion abroad on the health of British society and the British polity - about, in short, the corrupting effects of empire. As with many aspects of contemporary debate about empire, it is easily possible to feel that there was a great deal of displacement behaviour going on here; attacks on *'nabobs'* and *'nabobbery'* reflected unease about developments in British society as well as anxiety and concern about the activities of Britons abroad. In their greed, their bartering of money for position and status in society, the nabobs exemplified pressures and trends that were felt to be all too widespread in society. This was a society in which many were struggling to re-draw old boundaries in the face of increasing evidence of social mutability and change and deepening fears in some quarters about the erosion of traditional patterns of deference and social control. Many looked to traditional languages and images for reassurance in this context, which helps to explain why vocabularies of established interests and traditional values - hospitality, paternalism and charity - retained their prominence in much social and political

commentary in the later eighteenth century. It was also perhaps partly for this reason that discussions of Britain's advance overseas had, as Lawson puts it in one place, to be tempered with 'nobler concerns' than trade and material gain.

It is also possible to see behind this a tenacious and deep-rooted ambiguity about the relationship of trade and merchants to the 'national interest' or 'public good'. It was not just Adam Smith who thought that commercial interests were 'always in some respects different from, and even opposite to that of the public'.

British expansion overseas in the eighteenth century was very publicly and visibly debated, not surprisingly given the range of interests, emotions and issues which were involved. But it was the products of empire - its material bounty - which perhaps had the most tangible effects on eighteenth-century society. The previously unpublished essays in this volume - on tea and tea drinking - offer powerful reminders of this fact. It was not just a matter of the startling rapidity and scale with which tea drinking exerted its hold on all levels of British and indeed colonial American society from the late seventeenth century, although this is so striking as to deserve underlining as Lawson does. It also reflects the close relationship between, on the one hand, changes in the manners and codes of eighteenth-century society and, on the other, the spread of new habits and rituals surrounding tea drinking. This is not necessarily a new perception, but it is developed here in very interesting ways and in a manner which is impressively interdisciplinary.

One of the essays examines the forces and factors through which the state became so closely involved in the tea trade, and with such ultimately alarming consequences for the integrity of the empire. (It is perhaps one of history's neater ironies that it was one of the foremost products of empire - tea - that should have precipitated the final stages of the breach between Britain and the American colonies.) In the other essay, Lawson uses primarily pictorial and literary evidence to emphasize how far tea drinking helped to alter the choreography and pattern of many domestic and social lives in the eighteenth century. He raises in this context the important issue of how we perceive changes in the role and status of women in eighteenth century Britain, adding his voice to several others which have been critical recently of accounts of gender relations which appear to project backwards patterns and ideas which may have much greater applicability to the nineteenth century. He refers gently at one point to 'errors of omission' in the way historians have presented the way women lived in the eighteenth century (XV, p 18). Many contemporaries were deeply worried about the feminization of much cultural life and leisure in the eighteenth century. The mania for tea drinking, and women's mastery of the rituals surrounding tea drinking, which crossed the boundaries of public and private, can be seen as a powerful symbol and facet of this development. Unlike historians of eighteenth-century France or North America, British historians have been comparatively slow in pursuing in detail the ways in which the developing public sphere or spheres in eighteenth-century Britain were gendered. Yet it is an area of investigation that holds much promise; future research is also likely to disrupt loose generalizations about a hardening of divisions between private and public spheres in this period and the increasing exclusion of women from the latter.

It is appropriate that this review should end with a few words about Philip Lawson. I never met him, and reading this volume it was something I increasingly regretted. It is a fitting testament to his many qualities, strongly conveying the breadth and subtlety of his scholarship, as well as his technical skills as a historian. Several personal qualities also shine through, notably a powerful intellectual honesty and a deep commitment to a progressive and positive vision of his subject. By bringing together many of Lawson's articles and essays, this volume serves a very useful purpose. It is an important book and deserves a broad readership.

Other reviews:

Society for the History of Discoveries

http://www.sochistdisc.org/2003_book_reviews/lawson.htm [2]

Source URL: <http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews/review/31#comment-0>

Links

[1] <http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews/item/309>

[2] http://www.sochistdisc.org/2003_book_reviews/lawson.htm