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Geographies of Empire: European Empires and Colonies c. 1880-1960

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Author:

Robin Butlin

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Michael Collins

As the title of the book suggests, *Geographies of Empire* covers the period roughly from the beginning of the 'scramble for Africa' following the British invasion of Egypt in 1882 to the year by which many of the territories formerly acquired by European colonial powers had been lost or given up.

In fact Robin Butlin's informative and extremely wide-ranging account of empire often reaches into earlier periods, and the chronological period that constitutes the primary focus of the book is one in which the major European colonial empires were at their fullest geographical extent and tensions between European great powers arising out of colonial competition were at their height. In this respect it should appeal to a wide readership. Moreover, the coverage of imperial expansion and contraction does not contain itself to Russia and the imperial powers of Western and Southern Europe, but includes the rising Great Powers of the late 19th and early 20th century, the United States and Japan. In other words this is a book of enormous scope, although the British, followed by the French, empires tend to feature more heavily than others.

Chapter two, looking at 'chronologies, spaces and places', provides an overview of the spatial pattern of development of the seaborne European empires. Unusually, in addition to the usual imperial coverage, it contains a short section on the 'northern archipelago' and the extent to which Wales, Scotland and Ireland

were brought into a colonial relationship with England.(1) Butlin's analysis draws on the extensive historiographical overview by Stephen Howe, which points towards the difficulties created by attempts to view the relationship between England and Ireland under the guise of a 'generalised colonial model' (p. 56). (2) In addition to the historiographical focus, we might have been told more about the actual historical geography of the Anglo-Irish relationship, for example patterns of settlement and land use. However, Butlin has much ground to cover, and moving on from coverage of the British Empire, he turns first to France, then the Dutch Empire, Germany, Portugal and Spain, Belgium and Italy, followed by Russia, Japan and the United States. The breadth of coverage in this chapter somewhat compromises the depth in which each imperial power is investigated, but the chapter does constitute a helpful descriptive account of imperial expansion. The comparative dimension is less prominent than it might have been. With this in mind, the analysis of French claims in Morocco, and German imperialism more generally, might have benefited from a greater emphasis on the way in which the land grab that followed Britain's invasion of Egypt in 1882, and the subsequent exclusion of France from the Nile Delta region (Fashoda is mentioned on p. 267, but only as an aside) led to increased competition over colonial territory in North Africa, which saw Germany challenge France in Morocco twice in the immediate run-up to the outbreak of the First World War, once in 1905 and once in 1911. Butlin does acknowledge that Germany's colonial policy was 'clearly influenced by the colonial activities of other European states, notably France and Britain' (p. 97), but this period of competition for land, resources and markets 'which may or may not have precipitated the First World War (an unresolved debate)' seems to be ripe for further analysis by a historical geographer like the author.

Chapters three and four cover interconnected themes, with chapter three looking at population movement and the use of data and censuses linked to strategies of governance, or what Bernard Cohn has called 'the enumerative modality'.(3) The familiar example is British imperialism in India, which sought to develop complex taxonomies of populations as part of a process of modernisation and management intimately bound up with racialised distinctions and hierarchies. Butlin also looks at the use of numbers in white settler colonies, firstly South Africa, then Australia. A good deal of very instructive information is also provided about population changes within territories controlled by other European colonial powers both in Africa and in Asia. The chapter also includes a helpful summary of the literature concerning migration out of Europe to colonial territories, and within colonial systems. Chapter four then goes on to trace the impact of these migrations and settlements on land use, and includes a substantial section on Germany's colonial land policies in Africa, pointing out that Germany's relatively late entry into the competition for land and resources in Africa in part underpinned the devastating impact that German colonialism had in countries such as Cameroon (pp. 207-17).

Chapters five, six and seven cover exploration, geographical knowledge and the creation of geographical societies and the connections between cartography and colonialism. The chapter on exploration features, as is to be expected, familiar figures such as David Livingstone, as well as less well-known explorers in the British Empire such as Mary Kingsley (pp. 240-7). The history of geographical societies is an area where the author himself has recently published, but it also provides Butlin with an opportunity to showcase some of the best recent work in historical geography.(4) The work of Felix Driver, which is familiar to many historians of empire, and which 'via its linking of intellectual developments within the colonial metropole to the practice of imperialism at the periphery, has appealed to exponents of the new imperial history in recent years' features heavily.(5) With the proliferation of geographical societies amongst European colonial powers in the late 19th century there is the suggestion of transnational connections, for example the president of the Royal Dutch Geographical Society outlining Dutch colonial ambitions in a speech to the Royal Geographical Society in London in November 1879, and Dutch geographers subsequently consulting documents held in London (p. 305). The complicity of geographical societies with the colonial project, and the simultaneous intellectual drive to compare, contrast and sometimes share knowledge across borders makes for a fascinating topic in which intellectual history and historical geography neatly overlap.

Chapter eight looks at the intellectual, cultural and physical impacts of European 'civilising missions'. Following Chris Bayly (6), Butlin argues that the 'nineteenth and early twentieth centuries witnessed substantial expansion in most major religions, partly through greater association with rapidly developing

ideologies of nationalism? (p. 358). The following discussion places welcome significance on the role of gender in missionary activity, but ? although including a section on ?local agency and religious missions? ? Butlin might have spent more time looking at the way in which the indigenous religion of colonised peoples was reformed, developed and instrumentalised as part of a process of colonial resistance (the ?Hindu' revival, and the *Brahmo Samaj* immediately spring to mind).

Chapters nine, ten, eleven and twelve revert back to territory that is more obviously ?historical geography?, looking at environment, transport and communications, towns and cities, and the economic relationship between empire and colony. This is one of the strongest and most interesting sections of this extensive book, and an area where the value of historical geography is most apparent. The discussions of forestry, and particularly water use and management, are especially valuable, and this area of focus again provides the opportunity for Butlin to generously promote the work of some of his colleagues.

The book ends with a chapter on histories of decolonisation. Insights from the perspective of geography abound, with water featuring as an important factor, e.g. in the role of rivers in drawing boundaries or the control of water supplies as key aspects in negotiations between coloniser and colonised, as well as between emergent postcolonial states. The British have of course, quite rightly, come under much criticism for their obsession with the practice of partition as a decolonisation ?exit strategy?. Even if it does not raise any sympathy for British authorities, it is illuminating to learn that the Radcliffe commission ? which oversaw the drawing of boundaries in Bengal between India and what would become East Pakistan ? had to contend with river channels that dried up for parts of the year, and in fact which changed their course entirely (p. 587).

Because of its breadth, this book does work as a kind of textbook which would be of particular value for undergraduate and MA courses on the history of Empire. For that readership, it offers a solid overview of the colonial period with a particular emphasis on aspects of colonialism that fall within the parameters of what might loosely be called geography. A great deal of the literature on empire is also summarised and thoughtfully presented. There is however one caveat to add. The usefulness of the book for the undergraduate readership is undermined by some shortcomings in the way that Cambridge University Press has produced the book.

With regard to the referencing, it would have been far more appropriate in a book that draws upon as wide a literature as this does, to have used footnotes ? allowing the reader to glance down at the full reference ? rather than the Harvard system. One is required to turn to the bibliography to find out which particular book is being referred to, a task which is both tedious and cumbersome when it comes to a book of this size.

Much more significantly, a number of errors occur in the text. For example, we are told that Britain declared war against Germany and Italy on behalf of India in 1938 (p. 584). This is obviously an uncorrected typographical error, but it somewhat undermines the strength of the argument that undergraduates ought to stick to the scholarly literature, rather than use say, Wikipedia, because the latter contains basic factual mistakes.

There is also unnoticed repetition. As formidable as David Washbrook?s work on India is, surely it doesn?t warrant the same sizeable quote appearing twice (pages 68 and 581). This, combined with the fact that the page references to Washbrook?s article are different in each case, does not inspire confidence in the copy editing that has gone into the book?s production. This may appear to be overly pedantic, but one is left with the distinct impression that the publisher has done the author a disservice in this area, and he would surely be entitled to expect better from CUP.

More meaningfully, how far does it really constitute a new contribution, and specifically, is this a work of historical geography that will introduce the latest theoretical and methodological innovations in the field to the wider and more diffuse groups of historians working in the field of imperial history?

As I have suggested, the book leans heavily towards providing descriptive accounts of things falling within

the remit of geography ? e.g. migration, population, environment, transport and communications ? rather than explaining causes and explicating consequences within an analytical framework that is distinctive to historical geography. Butlin?s *Geographies of Empire* does not bring to the fore much of what is most striking about ?modern historical geographies?, which (in an edited collection of that name) Brian Graham and Catherine Nash suggested is concerned with new directions ?informed by feminism, post-structuralism, antiracism and post-colonial perspectives, sharing concerns about questions of power and meaning?.(7) Graham and Nash?s edited volume included contributions from scholars who have since gone on to produce some of the more innovative work connecting historical geography and the history of empire, such as David Lambert and Alan Lester?s *Colonial Lives*.(8)

Although the first chapter of the book makes reference to the field of post-colonialism, to issues of gender and sexuality, and to historical geographers who have recently sought to bridge the gap between histories of empire informed by postcolonial theory and the field of historical geography, one doesn?t really feel the weight of these more theoretically inclined perspectives *evenly* in the text that follows. That being said, this first chapter constitutes an exemplary overview of developments in the field of imperial historiography going back to J. R. Seeley, Hobson and Lenin through to Robinson and Gallagher, Cain and Hopkins, Chris Bayly and Miles Ogborn.

In sum, then, this is an impressively erudite and knowledgeable book, which draws on a considerable weight of scholarship. But for those (like this author) who are eager to better understand how historical geography can shape current developments in imperial historiography ? for example the recent ?transnational turn?, or perhaps an emergent ?material turn?, which looks to the way in which theories of power and identity are placed in social and material contexts by someone like Bruno Latour ? we may need to wait.

The author's response is pending.

Notes

1. What Butlin calls the ?northern archipelago? is perhaps more familiar to historians as the ?Atlantic archipelago?. See J. G. A. Pocock, *The Discovery of Islands: Essays in British History* (Cambridge, 2005).[Back to \(1\)](#)
2. Cf. Stephen Howe, *Ireland and Empire: Colonial Legacies in Irish History and Culture* (Oxford, 2000), p. 67.[Back to \(2\)](#)
3. Bernard S. Cohn, *Colonialism and Its Forms of Knowledge: The British in India* (Delhi, 2002), p. 8. [Back to \(3\)](#)
4. The linking of imperial and local is explicit in the title of Butlin?s recent essay R. A. Butlin, "'Geography - Imperial and Local"; the work of the Royal Geographical Society of Australia (Queensland Branch) 1885?1945', *Queensland Geographical Perspectives*, ed. I. R. W. Childs and B. J. Hudson (Milton, 2006), pp. 217?41.[Back to \(4\)](#)
5. Felix Driver, *Geography Militant: Cultures of Exploration and Empire* (Oxford, 2001). [Back to \(5\)](#)
6. Cf. C. A. Bayly, *The Birth of the Modern World 1780?1914: Global Connections and Comparisons* (Cambridge, 2004), introduction.[Back to \(6\)](#)
7. Brian Graham and Catherine Nash, *Modern Historical Geographies* (Harlow, 2000).[Back to \(7\)](#)
8. David Lambert and Alan Lester, *Colonial Lives across the British Empire: Imperial Careerings in the Long Nineteenth Century* (Cambridge, 2006).[Back to \(8\)](#)

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