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Imperial Island: A History of Britain and its Empire, 1660-1837

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Charles Prior

Among the challenges that define teaching the history of Britain to undergraduates, those presented by national context are perhaps the most complex. To offer generalisations based on experience, it emerges that students who live in the states that had their birth as imperial possessions tend to view their history as being initiated by a founding, as if the nation and the state appeared in a sudden act of genesis. The rise of Atlantic history has, to some extent, softened what was once a strictly imperial narrative. The holy trinity of race, class and gender put paid to that mode of imperial history that attended to state and economy; exploitative relationships were the only ones worthy of consideration, and the story always ended with the same moral ? that empire was a Bad Thing. On the other hand, those who inhabit the island that lay at the centre of empire are quite often unaware of its imperial past, despite the evidence that lies all around them in material and social form. Churchill's lone stand represents an act of atonement, which fits within a pattern of imperial memory that dwells on the heroic and romantic aspects of its history.

Scholarship, meanwhile, continues on its way. The past decade in particular has seen a reinvigoration of imperial and Atlantic history, driven by scholars such as David Armitage, J. H. Elliott, Linda Colley, Niall Ferguson, Maya Jasanoff, Trevor Burnard, Jorge Cañizares-Esguerra, and Colin Kidd, to name but a few. As respects the imperial history of Britain, we remain in the debt of John Pocock, whose ?plea? for a new subject in turn laid the grounds for what became the ?new British history?.⁽¹⁾ The result is that we now

locate the roots of empire in the fraught relations between the dominant English and the islands and kingdoms that lay on their frontiers, marches, and borders. Cultural historians have taught us much about the complex processes of the formation of societies and identity, and work of this type that has resisted the temptation to heap scorn on actors in the past is no less able to demonstrate the awful realities of empire. The main job of a text designed for use in the undergraduate classroom is to distil this scholarship, and contain it within a coherent narrative structure, augmented with maps and illustrations, and presented in a format that balances breadth and detail, while remaining alert to those elements of the subject that may appear foreign to undergraduates who possess only the slightest understanding of the early modern period. Paul Monod's new work represents an impressive achievement, offering students a compact and lucid narrative that maps on to what is conventionally called the 'long 18th century'. It is based on nearly three decades' worth of teaching at Middlebury College in Vermont, one of America's most highly-ranked liberal arts colleges, and while it is written with an American audience in mind, it will be no less useful to students in the United Kingdom and elsewhere.

The book is divided into seven parts of three chapters each, includes two dozen illustrations and a useful array of maps, and concludes with a bibliography divided by subject. Monod begins in the mode of Braudel, describing the geographical and social development of the archipelago and reminding the reader that the long process of state formation that took place there was driven by agglomerations that we recognise as empires. Perhaps the defining moment in this process was the Henrician reformation, whose statutes defined England as an empire and extended the concept of sovereignty into the realm of the sacred, and across the Crown's dominions. In a world of composite confessional monarchies 'dominated by the might and wealth of Catholic Spain' this was a bold statement of national purpose, and one that was clearly at odds with the ability of the state to project its power. Ireland and Scotland would remain stumbling blocks to unity, while the first settlements in Virginia were abject failures. Despite the founding of the East India Company, England lagged behind its peers in the creation of a centralised mechanism of state finance. The modes of personal and household monarchy favoured by the Stuarts meant that statecraft was left to amateurs; the French had Richelieu, the Swedish had Oxenstierna, and the English had Buckingham. Indeed, to the extent that a process of state-building was underway in the early stages of Monod's story, it was driven by forces that reshaped the state by first immolating it by war and regicide. 1660 is therefore the natural place to begin.

Yet Charles II and his brother were forced to contend with lingering issues of religion and questions of the limits of royal sovereignty that had undermined their father. From 1660 immigration to the New World began to surge, the profits from the Caribbean sugar machine flowed in, and the ships of the Royal African Company plied the oceans with their miserable human cargo. The states that formed on the Eastern seaboard were a mixed bag: godly Massachusetts, the male-dominated rural society of the Anglicised Chesapeake, and the polyglot Middle Colonies contained within them ingredients that limited the scope of royal control from the very beginning. Wars with the indigenous population, and resistance to the imposition of control over colonial trade were carried on against a backdrop of competition with the Dutch and the French. In Monod's narrative, 1688 is a turning point, which brought with it a sense of the unity of a British Protestant identity; the politics of party; the rise of commerce and public credit; limits on executive authority; all bound together by a 'confessional state'. Yet each of these had its corollary: English dominance came at the cost of the continued alienation of the Irish and Scots; the politics of party deteriorated into faction and the struggle to institutionalise an 'opposition' that was worthy of the name. The creation of the Bank of England in 1695 was a major step, but with it came lamentation about luxury, corruption, and the menace of standing armies, all of which sapped the virtues of the sturdy martial citizen celebrated by Harrington and Sidney. And whatever ambitions there were to base the *ancien regime* on a foundation of religious unity, there persisted a species of sectarianism that burst into the mainstream around figures like Sacheverell and Atterbury.

From here we move to the age of Walpole and the Pelhams, where crises in state finance were played out against lingering dynastic wars fought to secure the Protestant interest, and the wider conflict that redrew imperial boundaries from Louisiana to Quebec, and which laid the foundations for the British Raj in India and Prussian power in Europe. With the elimination of the French as serious rivals, the question now turned to how these new imperial possessions would be governed. One consequence of the decline of the Whigs

was that George III could govern through hand-picked ministers, a development that some regarded as a reversal of the hard-won concessions of 1688 (p. 210). The American crisis, when it came, tested the power of the Westminster parliament, and forced commentators on both sides of the Atlantic to ponder the true meaning of liberty, while England saw the rise and fall of four governments, riots in the streets of London, and the sundering of the Western flank of its empire. Yet, Monod reminds us of the economic benefits of British power, evident in the transformation of rural and metropolitan England, and the emergence of enlightenment, whose major figures used the grist of empire to fashion more durable concepts of rights and liberty. However, doubts remained: Burke famously wondered whether the empire would be consumed by its own 'perfidy and violence'. Indeed, contradictions abounded, and were evident in the continuing practice of African slavery by those who professed themselves to be champions of liberty, while the delicacies and intellectual sophistication of English society were based upon the predations of the East India Company under Hastings.

Here were the roots of debates that would define the politics of the 19th century, as the English laboured to portray their empire as liberal and progressive, the bringer of all good things to the wretched of the earth. Perhaps the absence of mind to which J. R. Seeley referred begins in the age of Austen, where red coats returning from far flung precincts of the British imperial world took their place alongside tea, spices and silk as mere ornaments of an enterprise where the majority were consumers rather than projectors. With Cook and the opening of the Pacific, the empire reverted to its former pattern of marches, border and frontiers. The island story was now a global epic.

The chief strength of this book is that it presents a complex and multifaceted history with exemplary clarity and concision. The forgoing summary represents the narrative arc of the book, which is embellished with a number of excellent and balanced pen portraits of major figures, richly detailed discussions of economics, urban politics, warfare and intellectual culture. Some readers, to be sure, will set the book aside wishing they had heard more of the indigenous peoples of the imperial world, not to mention those who laboured in its fields and plantations; yet if this book leads them to others, then what gaps remain are minor indeed.

The author is happy to accept this review and does not wish to comment further.

Notes

1. J. G. A. Pocock, 'British history: a plea for a new subject?', *Journal of Modern History*, 47 (1975), 601-24. Now see Pocock, *The Discovery of Islands: Essays in British History* (Cambridge, 2005).
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