

Reviews in History

Published on *Reviews in History* (<http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews>)

Empires of the Imagination: Politics, War, and the Arts in the British World, 1750-1850

Review Number:

942

Publish date:

Thursday, 1 July, 2010

Author:

Holger Hoock

ISBN:

9781861978592

Date of Publication:

2010

Price:

£27.00

Pages:

514pp.

Publisher:

Profile Books

Place of Publication:

London

Reviewer:

Jacob Glicklich

In this book Holger Hoock outlines the material and psychological investment of culture in the process of British identity-formation from the mid 18th to the mid 19th century. Studying the context of national consciousness Hoock draws on forms of aesthetics, war, literature and biography. His work parallels aspects of Bernard Cohn and Thomas Metcalf, but applies to an earlier period, and integrates components of North American military history. His main insight is to widen the scope of politics for early modern Britain, connecting it to strands of both art and perceived heroism. Hoock engages with and expands on the paradigm of Said, fleshing out the specific mechanism by which perceptions were made, remade and distributed to the population. The overview explores an atmosphere drenched in masculinity, in which 18th and 19th century British artists mythologized their own contemporaries. Invariably the narrative of this history engages deeply with race and class categories as well, with the representation of men as vital and forceful subjects framed by a context in which systematic privilege operated. Such actions emerged not as a conscious plan to extend domination over people's devoid of whiteness, but neither was the process of art, archeology and construction unconnected with operations of power. A central component of Hoock's piece is to incorporate a wide array of fields and to deny them the status of being apolitical.

Hoock identifies an increasing focus by the British towards glorification of military heroes beginning in the

middle of the 18th century. Precisely because their recent record had been poor, British commentators sought to develop an enduring legacy that would motivate courageous actors. The lost war with the American colonies generated a crisis of British identity, undermining their perceived cohesion of community, pride and masculinity. By forging iconic moments in marble, the British sought to celebrate historical triumph and military individuals. Families, and increasingly the state, took a role in commemorating heroism. Military defeats received no equivalent structures for memory. The focus was perpetuating a legacy of triumphant military identity. Hoock's account interprets artists in America and Britain as highly political figures, crafting political subjects and having a sustained impact on national symbolism. The main themes reinforced by monuments were awe, national confidence and individual contribution through heroic actions (p. 162). Norms of masculinity emerged with support from specific artists, official patrons and the Anglican hierarchy. There are central analogies between the project of heroic military commemoration and the religious project, but also as revealing differences. As Hoock highlights in his discussion of Nelson's funeral: "The notion of immortality implied in the stories of the St Paul's heroes is not the Christian notion of an afterlife, but the memory of future generations ... In the personal cult of Nelson, Christian terminology and ritual had been transferred to nationalism" (p. 186-7).

In the second part of his book, Hoock applies insight into a century of British organization of the past. He sees the arrangement of historic symbols as crucial to presentation of national cohesion. His main focus is on how public-private constructions of culture altered with greater state involvement, specifically how such processes worked to recover artifacts of antiquity and present them within the network of British pride. This entire venue was intrinsically politicized, with national museums connecting to cultural power and linking from there to diplomatic and military influence (p. 208). At ground level, by the 19th century British collectors routinely justified their efforts as claiming the past among natives totally ignorant of it. They envisioned real competition deriving from other imperial rivals such as the French. Access to specific antiquities was always contingent on specific arrangements of power and logistics, in a context both enabled by and reinforcing British imperialism.

India became a prominent component of this process starting in the late 18th century, with increased political control over the subcontinent closely linked to cultural involvement. The British attempted to racially isolate themselves at the same point that they increased the study of the Indian historical context. This irony speaks to the ingrained connections of knowledge and power, as increasing absorption with the colonial subject went hand in hand with the creation of difference and separation from such subjects. Indomania and Indophobia worked in tangent for a context of increased British emphasis on classifying India. Both elements assisted in developing knowledge of empire, while also irreparably altering the cultural politics of Britain. This tendency functioned partly in the engagement with archeology of India, which as in Britain emerged first from monuments to imperial warfare, then increasingly a picturesque organization of the whole landscape. In the survey of the past Indians were not entirely passive, having different levels of engagement as conveyers of knowledge (p. 297). In contrast to British claims, Hoock is careful to emphasize that this scholarly project was not purely a one-way project. In a diffuse network of power and historical inquiry Indian subjects existed at key points, and were not totally void of agency in relation to the British direction.

Until the mid 19th century British archeology in India mostly entailed the translation and circulation of texts. In the absence of excavation the aesthetic component of research was fairly explicit. Gathering this type of information about the past as well as the inter-century present proved crucial in the development of formalized rule over India. In this context studies such as Colin Mackenzie's survey on Mysore worked to collapse distinctions between the military and academia. The quantity of private collections as well as those of academic institutions increased, with the focus aimed at satiating the learned British elite. At various points arrogant and accepting, British surveyors showed the complexity at work in any specific interaction. Ultimately, however, Hoock identifies the relationship as an unequal one, with tightly bound intersections of material and informational power, in a manner that he states merits additional study: "However, even without major metropolitan collections prior to the high Victorian era, the archaeological practices analysed in these chapters speak to the ingenuity, passion, and persistence of individual officers, and to their ability to

use the resources of the Company state? (p. 349). More than just another narrative of individual intellectual triumph, the account indicates a network in which individual contributions were variously magnified and made redundant.

Finally, Hook analyses the way the material components of memory impacted on London. The British state reshaped its capital, and with it the orientation of individuals to public space. This process was promoted by the crown, but had a major impact on the development of a wider sentiment of national identity. The commitment to national memory involved increased fusion between government sponsorship and the cultural nation, making the early 19th century a watershed in British history. The increased monetary and psychological investment in artifacts altered the form of British metropolitan life. Displays emphasized the triumphalist nature of the royal dynasty specifically, and more enduringly promoted military leadership. The euphoria following the Napoleonic wars altered the architecture of London to reflect the linkage of arts, politics and memory. Infrastructural change in British museums and roads encouraged wider participation in the cultural politics of memory. This accompanied and assisted a new energy for Britishness, which also helped lead the country into the invested process of 19th-century imperialism. Tensions between different factions persisted, but this period also produced what Hook calls 'a permanent legacy in Parliament as an illustrated national history book' (p. 379). Such analysis works to break down the assumptions of British uniqueness in comparison with continental Europe, to explore ways British society also featured major state involvement in cultural politics. This relationship between the arts and public life was never a settled or unanimous consensus, and Hook observes the contested aspect of patriotic discourse across the late 18th and early 19th centuries (p. 384). Nevertheless, he argues for a significant political component to the British framing of aesthetics in this period, and an understanding of communal memory as derived from military celebration and imperial power. 'International cooperation and competition, domestic party politics, religious sensibilities, and aesthetic preferences modulated the language and practices of cultural patriotism. A nuanced understanding of the politico-cultural history of Britain in this period is predicated on appreciating such interplay between aesthetically performed politics and politically inflected art' as well as the international context and the capacity of empire formal and informal to push modes of appreciation (p. 385). Hook's work offers a survey comparable in some ways to a more interior-focused version of Steinmetz's *The Devil's Handwriting*.⁽¹⁾ Like that work, Hook's account testifies to both a diversity of forces acting on imperial culture and the underlying mechanisms of power within it.

Rather than detached mechanisms of culture unconnected with partisan controversies and political structures *Empires of the Imagination* reads these elements as sequences in an intensifying national consciousness. In large extent the approach is conventional, and it benefits from reapplying scholarly paradigms to the specific substance of aesthetic culture in its given time-range. Hook's material is valuable in a time of continued denial of the cultural components of empire, from Porter's outright argumentation to Cannadine's detached and status-oriented view of empire. In this context, Hook's most valuable argument is how the 'besieged' climate of military glory was communicated to the wider British populace. While the process emerged from direct royal involvement and was heavily invested in the mechanisms of the elite it was also distributed by them. In the transformation of London specific sponsors contributed directly to an expansion of consciousness in a more global and yet more restricted extent. In this regard Hook's writing recalls Schreier's *London 1900* ⁽²⁾, although with a more focused framing of the theme. Yet Hook is valuable for more than defending a common scholarship to the discourses of empire against the even more predictable refutation of such views. His work also offers an engaging foray into interdisciplinary substance, bringing a context to the forms of art and a specific articulation of how larger themes of Britishness could be cast materially.

The work stands in the shadow of Anderson's *Imagined Communities* ⁽³⁾, stretching the boundary of how internal processes and perceptions linked to power divisions, as well as physical monuments. The central concern for both the methodology of Hook's work and the era under consideration is the connection of the individual to the wider collective. Pulling in segments of individual lives with aesthetic creations blurs the distinction between past events and mental constructs, both with inter-century Britain and for contemporary scholars. In this period a major project was for individual patrons and artists to connect popular imagination

with a projected version of heroic military figures. A range of political viewpoints emerge as part of the developing culture, with radicals, conservatives and an ongoing investment by royal patrons. Accordingly, such currents are not understood by Hoock as a simple monolithic force driving a rigid set of understanding. The emergence of artistic forms into more intensive national and imperial occupations always contained variety, contestation in their aspects of arts and politics. Nevertheless there was a consistent trend which gained dominance through meeting a particular need of British elites and citizens, the compensation for military defeat and success. Under such pressures, there developed an incentive to celebrate and magnify specific individuals, making the culture of the polity connect more to specific archetypes, and through them to norms of behavior designed for everyone to mimic. Even where the monuments and art pieces did not generate equivalent actions, insofar as they were viewed they had their own impact on wider society. To this extent, the framers of such political artistry succeeded in altering the pattern of pride and emotional investment, in a manner at once complex and deeply problematic for wider global society.

Empires of the Imagination is a welcome addition to the historiography of the British Empire. Hoock's work offers new insight into the turbulent political narrative of revolutionary legacy and expanding scholarship of power. Furthermore it is an effective demonstration of the vitality of cultural studies in reframing core narratives of political symbolism in the construction of nationalism. Hoock's contribution advances our knowledge of the specific context of inter-century Britain as well as providing new interdisciplinary techniques for use in the exploration of the past. This book would serve well for a graduate seminar on imperialism, nationalism or the revolutionary context, as well as being of use to specialists.

Notes

1. George Steinmetz, *The Devil's Handwriting: Precoloniality and the German Colonial State in Qingdao, Samoa and Southwest Africa*. (Chicago, 2007). [Back to \(1\)](#)
2. Jonathan Schneer, *London 1900: the Imperial Metropolis* (New Haven, CT, 1999). [Back to \(2\)](#)
3. Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities* (New York, 1983). [Back to \(3\)](#)

Other reviews:

Guardian

<http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2010/mar/06/empires-imagination-politics-holger-hook> [2]

Telegraph

<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/books/bookreviews/7093821/Empires-of-the-Imagination-Politics-War-and-the-Arts-in-the-British-World-1750-1850.html> [3]

BBC History Magazine

<http://www.bbchistorymagazine.com/book-review/empires-imagination-politics-war-and-arts-british-world-1750%E2%80%931850> [4]

Source URL: <http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews/review/942>

Links:

[1] <http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews/item/4883>

[2] <http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2010/mar/06/empires-imagination-politics-holger-hook>

[3] <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/books/bookreviews/7093821/Empires-of-the-Imagination-Politics-War-and-the-Arts-in-the-British-World-1750-1850.html>

[4] <http://www.bbchistorymagazine.com/book-review/empires-imagination-politics-war-and-arts-british-world-1750%E2%80%931850>