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Andrew THOMPSON, *The Empire Strikes Back? The Impact of Imperialism on Britain from the Mid-Nineteenth Century*

Harlow: Pearson Education, 2005

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Andrew THOMPSON, *The Empire Strikes Back? The Impact of Imperialism on Britain from the Mid-Nineteenth Century*, Harlow: Pearson Education, 2005, xvii+374 p., ISBN 0-582-43829-2.

- 1 Readers already familiar with Andrew Thompson's *Imperial Britain: The Empire in British Politics c.1880-1932* (Harlow, 2000), will recognise the author's main thesis here, but also appreciate the extent to which he is now applying that interpretation to a much broader range of historical evidence. Whereas *Imperial Britain* argued the case specifically for the political impact of empire over a relatively short period, this latest study seeks 'to re-situate the empire in a reading of modern Britain's political culture, social development and economic performance' (p.239). Analysing the latter area, which historians of empire have traditionally explored in most detail and where they have tended to show that the empire had either little effect, or a negative effect, on the British economy, this study also finds that the empire did indeed play a fairly limited role. 'Britain's economic position', writes Andrew Thompson, 'was neither substantially improved nor materially weakened by the possession of an overseas empire'. But he then adds that, 'the mistake has been to apply the same framework of analysis to the empire's effects on British society and politics' (p.156). Thompson sets out to correct this flawed approach, to emphasize the very complex and often positive impact of the empire. In doing so, he

also calls into question some of the main ideological implications of contemporary British historiography: not least the relationship between empire and national 'decline'.

- 2 The book is divided into nine chapters. The first five deal with the impact of the empire on the lives of the British population according to social class (chapters 1-4) and from the specific point of view of women and children (chapter 5). The social bias then gives way, in the four remaining chapters, to questions of – by turns – politics, economics and national identity, with the final sequence being devoted to the 'after-effects' of empire: in relation to Britain's international role, to immigration or Britain's multi-ethnic society, and to wider questions of public policy. Each chapter sets out its stall clearly – often using a number of detailed case studies – and analyses material from an impressive range of archival and printed sources in order to point up the essentially plural nature of the perception and impact of the empire in Britain.
- 3 The symbiosis between imperialism and the British aristocracy, for example, is shown to be far less important, in both economic and social terms, than 'declinist' accounts would have us believe.¹ The professional middle-classes, Thompson shows, had a much more productive relationship with the empire as a source of income and status, so that their identity as a social group became closely intertwined with the empire, not least for those of a scientific bent: engineers, geologists, anthropologists, journalists, doctors, nurses... Both the aristocracy and the professional classes, notwithstanding the complexity of their relationship with empire, and given their relatively small numbers, maintain a certain coherence of attitude.
- 4 The same cannot be said of the entrepreneurial middle class and still less of the lower-middle class or the working class. Although that is only logical, given the size of the social categories which Thompson is surveying here, he nonetheless provides a convincing explanation for the variations in attitudes towards the empire as something more than a function of absolute numbers: *'different groups of working people were exposed to the empire in different ways, and [...] its meaning and popularity varied accordingly'* (p.40). The lower middle class by no means bought into the imperial idea or practice in any monolithic way, though those that did, Thompson shows, did so sometimes in a particularly vehement fashion. As for the working class, he is surely right to suggest that their relationship with the empire was more *'autonomous'* or mature than some, keener to explore manipulation of the lower orders, might want to admit.
- 5 True, changing habits of consumption, increasing access to an expanding popular press and publishing industry, as well as more traditional, oral aspects of working-class culture: all these converge to show a significant degree of cultural conservatism among working people. But, even if working people were certainly aware of the empire – especially as emigration to the colonies and the cheap postal service gained momentum – Thompson shows that awareness should not be confused with subservient imperialism or the deferential observance of an official line. This cultural and political independence is equally clear in respect of the trade unions: *'even when their own jobs were under threat, British workers were able to show some concern for the condition of coloured colonial workers and to support some of their political aspirations'* (p.82). Similarly, the considerable resources invested in imperial propaganda by the authorities, from the Great Exhibition to the Festival of Britain, or the frequent presence of imperial themes at the cinema, should not be taken, Thompson rightly points out, as a measure of how those films or that propaganda were received. His inkling, in the end, is that so much

popularity, as well as demonstrating popular awareness of empire, probably also signalled acceptance, if not enthusiasm, for the empire, rather than indifference or ignorance. Applying the criteria of age and gender to similar questions produces comparable results: *'the precise attitudes that resulted are not open to easy generalisations'* (p.122).

- 6 Turning to the relatively untouched area of the impact of empire on *'the political culture of the modern British state'* (p.124), Andrew Thompson is able to draw on a much more fully documented area. The considerable evidence to show that the empire 'struck back' on the machinery of British government and on the content and conduct of reform is backed up by evidence gathered from records of the flourishing extra-parliamentary political culture of the Edwardian period and its vigorous promotion of empire or, in some cases, denunciation of it. Indeed, one of the important ways in which the empire struck back was the promotion of itself as a force for political reform and social renewal: Labour, as Thompson shows, was to make useful political capital on a number of occasions out of progressive social and political movements within the empire and, directly or indirectly, *'the empire affected how the British chose to govern themselves'* (p.149): not least on how to define the interventionist element of the state's role.
- 7 In deciding how to govern themselves, the British were also, in a sense, saying who they were. And it is in this area – the forging of a national identity – that the question mark in the book's title perhaps comes more fully into its own, as Thompson explores the English language, British architecture, the monarchy and the army, all of which seem to throw up conflicting evidence for the degree of impact the empire had on 'Britishness'. In respect of the debate which has taken place in recent years, the evidence put forward here is important in showing how, among the constituent identities of the United Kingdom, it was the *English* identity which was most obviously suppressed by the imperial adventure. Perhaps because of that, there were attempts to hold onto the imperial legacy in post-1945 Britain. That legacy only really started to raise eyebrows and, in some cases, hackles, as the immigrants from former colonies later began to arrive in Britain: Thompson analyses in some detail the heated debate around immigration showing that it is difficult to see this as being defined solely in terms of its imperial dimension. Yet, that debate arguably represents the first point at which the British population was required to take stock and situate itself in relation to its imperial past: a process which continues to this day.
- 8 The devil is always in the detail. Having explored such a wealth of material – which can be followed up in the detailed notes – Thompson is justified in wanting to preserve intact for his reader the sense of complexity and plurality in the way the British reacted to their empire. He is a "splitter", not a "lumper" and argues that *'the empire's impact, far from being forceful and aggressive, was often subtle and unobtrusive'*. In the end, *'the big theory behind [the] book is that there is no "big theory"'* (p.241). True, maintaining that degree of indeterminacy does not come cheap in rhetorical terms: some readers may be tempted to feel exasperation at what looks like inconclusiveness. Yet Thompson is attempting to turn round a rather large liner. He is clearly testing assumptions concerning the critical validity of more compartmentalised social, political or economic approaches to the often 'polysemic' evidence at our disposal: approaches adopted in a number of seminal studies by other specialists on empire – John M. Mackenzie², David Cannadine³ or Bernard Porter⁴, to take just three examples.

- 9 True, it would have made for a more comfortable read to argue that empire is everywhere, or nowhere in British society; or that empire was uniformly nasty and mean, a reactionary stick with which to beat the colonies, or a magic wand to waft away the forces of reform at home. The painstakingly balanced approach adopted is actually quite a brave one, the more so since it also casts a sympathetic, but rigorous gaze in the direction of cultural studies, and the concern for identity and memory. Further, by hinting at the fact that the 'socialist' component, say, of 'social imperialism' was at least as important as its nationalist/imperialist component, by looking again at the late-Victorian and Edwardian period's virtual obsession with the nature of the state, and by following this dove-tailing of political culture and national identity through to the very end of the twentieth century, this book modestly, but persistently, shows that the empire is still within Britain and that a reasoned, detailed, unspectacular accommodation with it might prove helpful in getting that political culture and that national identity more in step with each other.
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NOTES

1. See, for example, Martin WIENER, *English Culture and the Decline of the Industrial Spirit, 1850-1980*. 2nd Edition (Cambridge: University Press [1981], 2004).
 2. *Propaganda and Empire: The Manipulation of British Public Opinion, 1880-1960* (Manchester: University Press, 1986).
 3. *Ornamentalism: How the British saw their Empire* (Oxford: University Press, 2001).
 4. *The Absent-Minded Imperialists: Empire, Society, and Culture in Britain* (Oxford: University Press, 2005).
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