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When the Foreign becomes the Domestic: Reading Britain in a Transnational Frame

At Home with the Empire: Metropolitan Culture and the Imperial World. Edited by Catherine Hall and Sonya O. Rose. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006. 338 pp.

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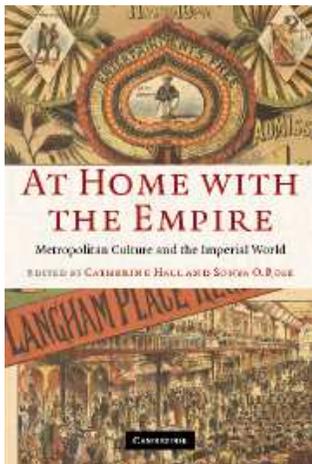
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<1>In her review of *Cultures of Empire*, an essay collection edited by Catherine Hall and published in 2000, Elizabeth Buettner located the book as part of a recent wave of writing British history which, challenging the nationalist premises of traditional British historiography, took as its assumption that “empire was crucial to the identity of colonizers as well as colonized, that Britain’s domestic and overseas histories cannot be disentangled,” and that empire must be “taken seriously as part of British culture.”⁽¹⁾ In this latest essay collection, *At Home with the Empire*, published in 2006, editors Catherine Hall and Sonya O. Rose and their contributors continue the assumptions of that previous volume. One overarching “impulse” of the book is to dissolve the metropole/colony binary, to “reconnect the histories of Britain and empire” (17), to rewrite British history so as to include “the neglected place of empire” (5).

<2>*At Home with the Empire* focuses this general and, by this time, fairly familiar project in a particular way. As the Introduction and the twelve essays in the volume make clear, the subject is the empire at home, the ways the empire was “taken for granted” (2), and was “lived across everyday practices” (3) in England. Antoinette Burton observes that “empire was so natural a fact of life in Britain that it has taken historians until very recently to rediscover its many influences and effects at home” (217). The point that the empire was naturalized as part of ordinary domestic practices is repeated throughout these essays, along with a second point that there were “numerous . . . avenues through which empire became commonplace” (28). Those avenues, the very multiplicity of the ways empire made itself manifest in the everyday lives of the British at home, make for an incredibly rich research opportunity for scholars interested in understanding the very specific ways the transnational dimension provided by imperialism shaped British cultural, social, economic and political history. As Burton also emphasizes, in what I would call a third key assumption of the volume, “the history of imperial political culture—its uneven development, and the convergences and divergences of people, ideas and power it produced—is surely in the details” (229). It is a few of those details that the essays in this volume explore.

<3>If the place *At Home with the Empire* is attentive to is primarily England, the time it focuses on is primarily the long nineteenth century. Following the Introduction, the first essay, by Catherine Hall, looks at Macaulay’s massive *History of England*. Hall adeptly lays out the ways the *History of England* offered a view of British history as a narrative of progress, of noble heroes and the triumph of justice, of increasing civilization and unification of peoples, of an onward and upward movement through which those in the scepter’d isle were shaped into an imperial race with a “prosperous present and future” (52). This opening chapter, establishing Macaulay as writing the very kind of history which this volume works to unravel, a history in which the domestic and the national are separated from the foreign and the transnational and the British are presented as homogeneous, works beautifully as a foil to the rest of the essays.

<4>The Macaulay chapter is followed by Laura Tabili’s fine essay on “Britain’s internal ‘others.’” In perfect counterpoint to Macaulay’s imagined nation, consisting of an amalgamated and homogeneous race, Tabili investigates who actually composed the British nation. She argues that “Britain was never a monolithic, closed society” and that “successive waves of conquerors, invaders and migrants comprised the British people” (53). In a chapter that seems a model of good scholarly methods, Tabili looks (regrettably) briefly at some available information about a

range of colonial and continental immigrants to England, including the Jews, the Irish and the Germans, as well as referring to the French, the Italians and the Scots. She argues that we cannot simply conclude that a particular group was othered because the record provides instances of othering, for the very reason that the problems between groups are what tended to be recorded. These instances erase the ways there was accommodation—precisely what wasn't recorded.

<5>The remaining ten essays trace a few more of the “numerous avenues” in which the empire functioned to influence and shape British culture. Jane Rendall considers the ways a range of women writers used the empire comparatively, to take up the question of the condition of women in Britain. These writers “legitimized their claims for empowerment in print, on the grounds of their philanthropic, civilizing and educational responsibilities, in the Empire as well as in Ireland and at home” (121). Drawing on the work of Ann Stoler and others on colonial control of sexuality, Philippa Levine offers a fascinating piece on some of the specific ways (i.e., immigration laws, rules on British nurses) sexuality, “always a construct,” was “in the British arena an effect of empire, a category built and shaped by imperial concerns” (141). Clare Midgley points out some ways imperialism enabled women’s public activism in Britain, earlier through the anti-slavery and foreign missions movements and later through support for the South African War, female emigration societies and the Primrose League. Midgley strikes a frequent note in this volume, the “patchy and incomplete state of research,” but concludes that “what is clear is that empire-focused activism was a central component of middle- and upper-class white women’s public work and political engagements throughout the period of study,” and that “women of colour also made crucial contributions to debates on race and empire” (250). Cora Kaplan turns to literature 1800-50 and, in a brief coda, 1950-2005, to point out that literature can function for historians as more than mere illustrative example and to suggest that “a discursive figure ... –the invasive and disturbing presence of a woman of African or partly African descent on British soil—emerges ... at particular historical moments, giving narrative shape and virtual embodiment to temporarily specific constellations of hopes, fears and anxieties” (208). Kaplan’s evocative essay is perhaps less compelling for literary scholars, given how much work has already been done on empire in the works she discusses, particularly *Mansfield Park*, *Adeline Mowbray*, *The History of Mary Prince* and *Jane Eyre*.

<6>Joanna de Groot offers a wonderful piece on consumption in Britain, as an agent rather than just an effect of material changes. She looks at the expansions of tea-drinking and the developments of sweetened tea, the tea table, tea or coffee breaks and Lyons tea shop chains in terms of class mobility, of gender anxieties, and “the shaping of human relationships and identities and of social structures and institutions” (177). Susan Thorne takes up the question of religion and empire, examining the Evangelical revival and the birth of modern missions in their institutional form as staffed by volunteers, global in aspirations, and focused on people outside Christianity. Thorne’s valuable points about the foreign mission movement include that it was often at odds with imperial goals, that it was probably the major source of information about the Empire for audiences at home, that it gave public voice and power to women, and that its assumptions and goals changed over the century. James Epstein considers the difficult topic of the “impact of empire on British class formation and identities” (251). He offers fascinating glimpses of the development of gentlemen capitalists, the anti-slavery movement in terms of class politics, relations between military service and class, and ideas of exclusion. But for me Epstein’s essay is most valuable in insisting both that the “impact of empire on class was at best uneven” (274) and that this is a subject which needs much more scholarly work.

<7>Some of the essays examine the political dimension of the empire at home. In an argument I had assumed was already won, but among some historians is not, Christine Kinealy traces the status of Ireland in relation to England from the Act of Union to partition. Her excellent discussion of such topics as the 1831 Education Act, the 1838 Irish Poor Law, British government responses to the Famine and the racialization of Irish immigrants to Britain persuasively supports her view of the colonial position of Ireland. Antoinette Burton offers a wide-ranging look at the part empire played in domestic political debates. Her discussion of “social imperialism” in the late century as a “major ideological backdrop for British politics” (216), along with her discussions of attitudes in the periodical press to the white settler colonies and of the genre of “reform minded tourism” (222), are particularly stimulating. Keith McClelland and Sonya Rose close the volume by exploring “how Britain’s status as an imperial nation informed debates about political citizenship” (274). Defining who constituted a citizen required defining who did not. The essay is especially strong in its discussions of public definitions of “good” citizenship and of the some of the consequences of that ideology after the First World War, in the public debates about women’s suffrage and the development of “women citizens as consumers of

...about women's writing and the development of women writers as consumers of empire" (295).

<8>*At Home with the Empire* is an unusually valuable collection, both for the wide range of topics it can include with the frame of how the empire functioned within Britain and for the high quality of the essays which explore those topics. Moreover, the volume not only does a great deal, but also points the way repeatedly to how much more can and should be done. With its extensive and thorough bibliography, its repeated suggestions of research still to be attempted within this subject, and an introduction which can stand alone as a survey of recent historiography and a nuanced presentation of the meaning and importance of reading British domestic history as transnational, *At Home* can guide future scholarship in this growing field.

Endnotes

(1)Elizabeth Buettner, Rev. of *Cultures of Empire: Colonizers in Britain and the Empire in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries*, ed. Catherine Hall, *History in Focus* 6 (Winter 2003), 20 Jan. 2008 <<http://www.history.ac.uk/ihr/Focus/Empire/reviews/buettner.html>>. (△)

