



Holger Hoock, *Empires of the Imagination: Politics, War, and the Arts in the British World, 1750-1850* Profile Books: London, 2010. ISBN 978 1 86197 859 2. 544pp £30

This is an ambitious book that takes the reader through the history of Britain as a moderate power on the edge of Europe in the mid-eighteenth century to the undisputed pre-eminence of the British empire in the mid-nineteenth century, with London as a global city and self-conscious, architectural, and cultural statement of power. Historians have for some time now recognised that empires are not merely economic structures. Equally, they are not simply the product of political decisions, diplomatic arrangements, or military conflict alone. Empires also have an intellectual history. They need an understanding of purpose so that interests can coalesce and something of a national endeavour can be undertaken. What imperial powers found in faraway places in terms of resistance and cooperation from native populations, or of environmental hardship or opportunity, is matched in importance by what they took with them in terms of intellectual baggage, an understanding of purpose and of legitimacy. It is the interplay of the cultural and the evenimental that gave European empires their unique characteristics.

What makes the study of empires fascinating and challenging in equal measure is that this self-perception is constantly evolving and hopelessly subjective. The value of this book, therefore, is that it highlights and celebrates this very elasticity. Far more art history than military history, as traditionally understood, it is of no less interest for that. Holger Hoock explores the changing perceptions of the British empire through a detailed and fascinating analysis of the art and physical commemoration of military and imperial people and events and the equally important, but hitherto less studied, phenomenon of archaeology and competitive collection of artefacts from around the world which was such a feature of nineteenth-century imperialism. There are comparisons with continental empires and states whenever they are needed, but the book is about empires, in the plural, only in the sense that there were a number of competing and evolving perceptions of the British empire. Yet Hoock ranges widely, not just chronologically but also by taking in the breadth of the empire's global reach, treating eighteenth-century America and India with equal authority. From this lofty perspective, what Hoock explores is anything but imaginary. It is the long-term interactive process of representation and ideas defining and inventing empire and being, in turn, shaped by events.

Reassuringly, Hoock does not overstate his case, and the empire that he traces reflects a military and imperial history that many historians will recognise, with the Napoleonic period as the key developmental stage. Comparisons between St Pauls Cathedral and Les Invalides in Paris, under the influence of Napoleon, as one prominent example, shows not just how empires competed with each other and shaped each other's process of formal representation but puts national peculiarities into sharp focus. In Britain, although it embarked on an ambitious project of commemoration that could compete with those abroad, the state often shared the responsibility of remembering and representing with semi-private institutions and individuals, just as it shared the Victorian passion for collection and the classification of knowledge. Les Invalides, or the Pantheon, on the other hand, reveal state-sponsored efforts at representation that was not usually matched in London. This interpretation has echoes in the contemporary history of eighteenth and nineteenth-century empires, which tends to credit Britain's less formal structure and its integration of government and of private, mercantile



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interests for its long-term success. Yet Hooch does not just explore the politics of commemoration internationally, in competition with France, but internally as well. In Britain, there was an unease with embracing the universal, participatory commemorations of the continent which were more willing to honour the individual soldier and acts of bravery as part of the nation at arms.

Hooch is, therefore, quite right that the book invites comparisons with other states, but he has done a good service by insisting that simple, binary opposites of inclusive Britain versus statist France need to be abandoned. Indeed one of the most significant contributions of the book was in bringing out the role of the Georgian monarchy in representing the empire in the eighteenth century. As a result, historians of the empires generally, and of the British empire in particular, will find a refreshing and nuanced new perspective on many familiar themes, such as formal versus informal empire. Overall, there is a clear reminder of the many ambiguities which bedevil the subject, notably in the study of painters having to balance competing political loyalties before and after the war of American Independence or in the huge concerts and formal celebrations of military might in the years thereafter in the midst of imperial decline. In a very handsomely produced book, with all the colour plates and illustrations that a study like this would require, Hooch applies interdisciplinary skill and an expert eye to the artistic representations of the period with a gift for explanation that will interest and inform any reader.

There is a brief epilogue of only nine pages on the Great Exhibition of 1851 packed, as one might expect, with examples of self-conscious representations of empire which could easily have been expanded to a whole chapter, or major section, of the book. Thus, not only an effective final look at its themes and a concluding statement, it serves equally well as a reminder of the further potential and the richness of the art historical approach, if that is not too limiting a description of what has been undertaken here, to other periods of imperial history and indeed of other empires.

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