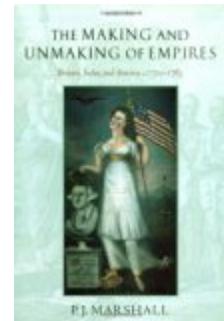


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Britain at a Crossroads: Two Paths, One Map

British imperial histories have long pointed to the late eighteenth century as a crucial point of divergence, finding within it the dissolution of the first British Empire and the origins of the second empire. While there certainly is some merit to this approach, both chronologically and geographically, this tendency is also a factor of the relative fragmentation of British historical studies: the division and often fractured relations between imperial historians and those whose work focuses upon the metropole itself. No doubt part of this problem stems from the difficulty in adequately mastering the intricacies of a political organization that spanned three continents, but the relative paucity of “synthetic” histories has been a glaring lacuna for those interested in broader questions concerning the organization and effectiveness of the imperial system. P. J. Marshall’s study serves as an excellent foray into filling this gap, showing the complex and interrelated nature of the British Empire during a key moment of transition.

One of the editors of the majestic *Oxford History of the British Empire* and the *Cambridge Illustrated History of the British Empire*, as well as the author of studies focused upon the British in India, Marshall is eminently qualified for this task, as his background provides a thorough grounding in colonial issues in both the Atlantic and Asia. Marshall’s goal is to show the inter-related nature of the “expectations and strategies of Americans and Indians within a British imperial framework,” during the critical period spanning the opening salvos of war with France during the 1750s through the Peace of Paris in 1783 (p. 3). Arguing against the established tradition

that sees these locations in isolation from one another (physically as well as temporally), Marshall provides a nuanced examination of domestic and international political events that stresses the reciprocal nature of interactions within the empire. Marshall expands upon Ronald Robinson and John Gallagher’s familiar notion of an “official mind” in order to explore the attitudes and decisions of the political elite within Britain and their negotiations with local elites in the colonies.[1]

Marshall organizes his analysis of how Britain projected its power around two concepts: expansion and empire. The first of these is a rough corollary to the notion of “informal empire,” stressing the manner by which commerce, migration, and the diffusion of culture acted to create “communities” of “British” sentiment within the colonies. For Marshall, close consideration of these factors helps to highlight the dynamism present on the peripheries of the empire, which he contends led to a greater sense of integration in the face of increasing ethnic and religious diversity. Still, Marshall is clear that in both the Atlantic and Indian cases the responses of local elites (and their relationship with their British counterparts) explains the divergent paths between “unmaking” and “making” empire. For instance, Marshall stresses that the American colonists did not view British expansion (in this sense) as a threat, but rather as the foundation of their self-image as “partners” in the empire, while in India a series of situational alliances between local elites and representatives of the empire lacked the same sense of shared commitment. Despite some fears that this expansion could harbor threats to British virtue

that echoed the examples of Rome and Spain, these concerns for potential despotism or tyranny were more commonly articulated in response to the second of Marshall's categories: empire. As used by Marshall, empire refers to ideas of coercion and rule as seen through the imperial ambitions and capacities of the British state. He notes that, in both political and military senses, Britain was increasingly skilled at waging war and defending the territory gained, and links these developments to the willingness of Parliament to exert its authority at home and abroad. As Marshall observes, the danger of this change in strategy arose when confronted with the dominant vision of empire held by the British during this time as being "Protestant, commercial, maritime, and free" (p. 6). In order to explain how Parliament's actions and attitudes came into conflict with those of the colonists, Marshall carefully explores three chronological periods, highlighting the growing tensions throughout the emerging imperial system, stressing the crucial years between 1763 and 1776.

Marshall begins by examining events prior to and during the Seven Years' War, culminating in the first Peace of Paris (1763). According to Marshall, the importance of these events stems from the territorial gains that emerged, albeit in different manners, in both America and India. In the Atlantic sphere, the lands gained from France are cited as providing a crucial impetus for reframing government authority. While the colonists argued that their contributions to the war entitled them to envision their relationship with Britain as a "compact" of equals, the need to defend this new territory and control trade led Parliament to call for new administrative solutions that conflicted with colonial aspirations for near-autonomy. Thus, while the colonists saw the events of 1754-63 as producing a more "integrated" empire, leading figures in the metropole were led to reconsider the very basis of their empire, increasingly calling for tighter control over the periphery. In India, Marshall clearly shows how, despite British efforts to manipulate local elites, "they often ended up being themselves manipulated for Indian purposes" (p. 120). The fluid political system in India during this time, coupled with the rivalry with France, gave the British ample opportunities to intervene and the East India Company seized upon these chances, particularly in forming a mutually beneficial alliance with Muhammad Ali Khan. For instance, in Bengal, the grant of the *diwani*, or revenue authority, to the Company in 1765 ensured a steady and profitable stream of revenue, but also deepened the interdependence of the British and local Indian elites. As the Company and the

British government came to rely upon these resources, territorial control and defense became increasingly essential for the overall health of the empire. In each of these cases, the expanded calls for government authority, sparked by the acquisition of new territory, resulted in policy changes that ran counter to traditional British theories of empire that had valorized its "free" nature.

The bulk of Marshall's study centers on the period between 1763 and 1776, carefully showing how British and colonial elites engaged in a struggle to define the nature of political authority within the empire. In America, Parliamentary efforts to exert more control resulted in colonial fears of an encroaching "universal monarchy" that would undermine their freedoms. Whereas American writers such as James Otis stridently denounced the decay of British virtue and the rise of inflexible government coercion, his British counterparts contended that rising taxes were merely a realistic response to the growing costs of the imperial system. Marshall describes the problem facing British policy-makers in terms of competing strategies of assimilation and accommodation; namely, should Britain "try to assimilate the king's new subjects to British norms or to accept the existence of a new diversity within the empire" (p. 183). While the natural tendency of Whitehall leaned toward the former, the economic and political challenges of controlling and defending the Atlantic colonies made this a difficult task. As the British sought to convince colonial elites to accept the authority of Parliament, their appeals were undermined by a growing sense of affinity between the colonies themselves that weakened the earlier ties between the metropole and the peripheries. During the 1770s, the British did endeavor to buttress support for Parliament and undermine the growing inter-colonial affinities by adopting different tactics for each colony, but these efforts too were doomed to fail as the gap between the realities of empire and the tradition of "freedom" became more apparent. In India, the British faced a similar problem during this period, as the commercial and military importance of these colonies increased. Just as in the Atlantic, the British sought to tailor their imperial apparatus to each of the presidencies under their control, eschewing the use of a uniform system of government throughout all India. Although most successful in Bengal, the East India Company and the British government worked closely with local Indian elites, who were more receptive than their American counterparts due to their understanding of empire: here the lack of shared cultural touchstones weakened the appeal of assimilation, and accommodation became the governing watch-

word. Thus, Marshall stresses that, while the British charted similar strategies in both the Atlantic and India, the attitudes and ideas of the local elites were primarily responsible for the divergent results in each case.

The final chronological period Marshall examines covers 1776 to 1783, during which the results of these earlier strategies came to fruition. Returning to his original framework, Marshall contends that after 1783 expansion and empire moved on separate trajectories, although there was a continued commitment to empire. In the Atlantic, the sense of shared culture and ideals of an “empire of common Britishness ... broke apart on the rock of different interpretations of Britishness” (p. 374). Earlier models of assimilation became untenable as the empire that emerged from the Peace of Paris (1783) incorporated a markedly different population. While the Atlantic trade continued to be profitable, the growing importance of the *diwani* revenue meant that India was an increasingly crucial piece of the imperial system and received correspondingly greater attention from British policy-

makers. Still, Marshall forcefully concludes by stressing that in each case, the British applied the same tactics, and the different results stemmed from the attitudes of local elites, since “imperial purposes appeared to be compatible with the interests of significant Indian elites, especially in Bengal, while American elites found them incompatible with their interests as well as ideologically repugnant” (p. 378). Thus, in the end, control of India was not a compensation for the loss of the American colonies, but rather the result of the manner by which the similar policies were accepted or rejected by the periphery. By exploring these developments, Marshall’s study provides an important service to those interested in bridging the gap between domestic and imperial histories of Britain during a crucial period.

Note

[1]. Ronald Robinson and John Gallagher, *Africa and the Victorians: The Official Mind of Imperialism* (New York: Doubleday, 1981).

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