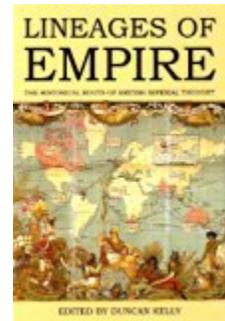


Duncan Kelly, ed. *Lineages of Empire: The Historical Roots of British Imperial Thought*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009. xv + 247 pp. \$60.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-19-726439-3.

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## The Idea of Empire

Despite work by scholars such as David Armitage, Uday Singh Mehta, Jennifer Pitts, and Duncan Bell, to cite just four examples of a recent upsurge of interest in empire and political theory, we still have only a partial understanding of the historical discourses surrounding the intellectual roots of empire.[1] To be sure, imperial historians have devoted much ink to “discourse” as a dynamic feature of the history of empire.[2] Whether invoking Orientalism, Michel Foucault, or the Subaltern School, much of the history very loosely grouped under the aegis of “postcoloniality” has argued that the very essence of imperialism was ideational. Relationships of inequality and power were inscribed in the various iterations of imperial rule and culture created by European powers. Recovering the history of these relationships requires historians to be attentive to how ideas and language were constructed and contested. This work has without question widened our understanding of how and why empires functioned, and how they shaped the lives of those in both the metropole and the colonized world. Yet like the politico-economic imperial history which is sometimes presented as its foil, the “new imperial history,” whether postcolonial or more empirically based cultural history, largely ignores the ideational beginnings and subsequent intellectual rationales of empire. The “idea of empire” is assumed from its later nature.

Refuting such *ex post facto* reasoning is one goal of intellectual histories of imperialism, as on display in the book under review, *Lineages of Empire*, edited by Duncan Kelly. The book is derived from a 2006 symposium

on the roots of British imperial thought, and published as a proceeding of the British Academy. While the opening essay by James Tully attempts to draw some impressionistic contemporary conclusions from a series of historical imperial antecedents, the strength of the book is the reconstruction of aspects of historical political imperial thought rather than any (necessarily politicized) present salience such thought might have.

Much of the historiography on the political theory of empire, particularly as it relates to Britain, concentrates on two subjects. The first, a subset of histories of the Atlantic world, is what used to be called “The First British Empire” which took form in the eighteenth century in the Americas. Understanding the relationship between British settlers, the Imperial Parliament, and the Crown, especially relating to the key question of sovereignty, is an important theme in this literature. A second is the dialectic of imperialism and Enlightenment rationalism, with a focus on the roughly contemporaneous developments of Britain’s imperial ascendancy in India in the latter eighteenth century and the advent of principles of political economy.

These temporal and thematic interests are replicated in *Lineages of Empire*, where only the final two essays, by Douglas Lorimer and Jeanne Morefield, focus specifically on post-Georgian subjects. Following a short part 1, which includes Tully’s essay and a chapter by Mehta on the ways by which postcolonial states have been constituted through a self-conscious refashioning of their im-

perial political pasts, the book's part 2 presents a series of chapters on "historical debates."

In the only chapter in part 2 which extends its coverage beyond Britain, Richard Whatmore reflects on the implications for small states of the eighteenth-century growth of European empires, spurred by the national rivalries emanating from the application of statecraft to economic affairs. Whatmore demonstrates that such growth posed both an existential threat and an opportunity to cultivate protection and/or commercial gain. Phiroze Vasunia examines the various providential uses of Virgil made by British imperial writers in the long eighteenth century, concentrating especially on Edward Gibbon at the era's opening and Alfred, Lord Tennyson at its close. Iain Hampsher-Monk and Robert Travers are concerned with the relationship between empire and the development of political economy in the late eighteenth century. Hampsher-Monk's fine chapter examines Edmund Burke's attempts to come to terms with "the dynamic between the economic and moral properties of empire, and its prospects for survival" (p. 118) in an age when Adam Smith's concept of a commercial empire was eclipsing the more customary established practices of imperialism favored by Burke. Travers also writes on Smith, comparing the latter's root and branch attack on the East India Company's monopoly status with the Scottish political economist James Steuart's preference for more stringent "economies of control" (p. 158). Both cases, Travers argues, demonstrate the need to reconcile histories of imperialism and political economy, rather than treat them as mutually exclusive developments.

Karen O'Brien also challenges conventional wisdom in her chapter on the role of Tory Romanticism in the Georgian discourse on state-assisted emigration to the colonies. While she does not dispute the prevailing contemporary perception of emigrants as "wastrels"—assisted emigration, after all, represented but a small percentage of total emigration flows which were dominated by penal convicts and "casualt[ies] of industrialisation, war and poverty" (p. 161)—O'Brien suggests that voluntary emigrants represented a promise of "social uplift" embodied in romantic ideals of "constructive imperialism" (p. 162). After O'Brien's chapter, the book is silent on mid-Victorian imperial thought. This is an odd lacuna, for Victorian concepts of world order were fundamental in constructing the ideational infrastructure upon which rested the New Imperialism of the late nineteenth

and early twentieth centuries.[3] Lorimer picks up the thread at this point, providing a fine examination of the language of race relations in the decades before the First World War. He convincingly shows the separate, though not mutually exclusive, historical trajectories of biological and cultural discourses of race, and argues that it was the latter which more directly influenced the imperial racial discourse of Empire's last decades. Morefield concludes the volume with a careful exegesis of the imperial connotations of the political theorist Harold Laski's theory of sovereignty.

Despite the inevitable challenges of coverage and continuity endemic to an edited volume, *Lineages of Empire* is an important contribution to the history of imperial political thought. It illustrates the connection of imperial thought with other prominent intellectual discourses in modern British history, including the merits of emigration, political economy and demography, the role of the state and sovereignty in British political life, the language of race relations, and the invocation of classical models in understanding Britain's empire. The essays in this book remind us that at every point in its history, Britons thought about the "idea of empire." They variously challenged, defended, or questioned the assumptions of what Morefield terms, in a narrower application to Laski that holds for all imperial thinkers, their "habits of imperialism" (pp. 226-235). There is still much to learn about the history of these practices of thinking, equally relevant for "new" and "old" imperial histories alike.

#### Notes

[1]. David Armitage, *The Ideological Origins of the British Empire* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000); Uday Singh Mehta, *Liberalism and Empire* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999); Jennifer Pitts, *A Turn to Empire* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005), Duncan Bell, *The Idea of Greater Britain* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2007).

[2]. For a useful survey of some of this material, including "postcoloniality," see Stephen Howe, "Empire and Ideology," in *The British Empire: Themes and Perspectives*, ed. Sarah Stockwell (Oxford: Blackwell, 2008), 157-176.

[3]. See Duncan Bell, ed., *Victorian Visions of Global Order: Empire and International Relations in Nineteenth-Century Political Thought* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007).

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