H-Net Reviews
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Sheryllynne Haggerty, Anthony Webster, Nicholas J. White, eds. *The Empire in One City?: Liverpool's Inconvenient Imperial Past.* Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2008. xiv + 237 pp. $89.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-7190-7887-3.

Reviewed by Phillip Dehne (Department of History, St. Joseph's College New York)
Published on H-Urban (January, 2011)
Commissioned by Alexander Vari

Liverpool and British Power

As the editors of this compilation understand, historians positioning the city of Liverpool within the broader tale of British history have taken two paths. One, following the powerful British labor history tradition, focuses on the city's working-class persona, with the "Scousers" as the westernmost of the northern mill hands, if more maritime in their work, their city more transit hub than manufacturing center. The second portrays Liverpool as a center of global merchant trade, meaning primarily trade (particularly in slaves and cotton) with the United States, the ever-critical route to Britain's economic power through the city's eighteenth- and nineteenth-century heyday. In this book, the editors ask whether the dominance of these two paradigms has allowed the city's "imperial experience" to be ignored. Has overlooking the impact of the British Empire proven detrimental to historians' understanding of the city of Liverpool? And more broadly, has this myopia toward Liverpool skewed our beliefs about British imperialism?

To historians of globalization these questions might appear odd. Rather than a dichotomy between globalization and imperialism, the either/or suggested by the editors, historians of both phenomena like Peter Cain and Antony Hopkins have suggested that nineteenth- and twentieth-century British imperialism fits as a keystone in the arch of that era's globalization, with imperialism as a subset of the broader phenomenon of the worldwide flow of goods, capital, ideas, and power.[1] If observed through this paradigm, chapters describing such things as the growth and death of Liverpool shipping lines as an imperial tale rather than a tale of globalization appear rather hair-splitting. Other contributions simply can be said to merit the question mark in the book's title. For instance, John Herson's chapter on Liverpool as a "diasporic city" in the nineteenth century cannot help but point out that the bulk of such trade (in voluntary human migration) was with the United States, a place definitively outside the British Empire, and indeed he never claims that this massive transmigration through Merseyside docks had any relation to empire or imperialism.

For a number of writers in this book, the question of Liverpool as an imperial city is best addressed by examining whether its residents, especially its business class, had any power over the direction of Britain's imperialist policies and practices. This book directly addresses the question of who held the levers of power in British imperialism–the bankers and "gentlemanly capitalists" of London, following Cain and Hopkins, or the manufacturing and shipping interests of the "north." Despite a chapter showing the influence of Liverpudlian merchants on British imperial policies toward China and India, all agree that time brought a decline of Liverpool's influence in relation to London. The movement of power toward the southeast of England appears particularly obvious in South American trade, as described in an insightful essay by Rory Miller and Robert Greenhill. By the last decade of the nineteenth century, the best new trades like Argentine meat went through London, and with them new shipping lines expanded services from South American ports to London, while even longtime Liverpool merchants moved to London for access to increasingly critical capital markets necessary for the expansion and development of their trading schemes.

Undoubtedly this volume proves that empire marked Liverpool's experience, even if Liverpool did not dominate the British Empire. Its overseas connections, as Murray Steele explains, made its celebrations on imperial occasions like jubilees a bit more excited and broadly popular than anywhere else in the skeptical working-class north. Although the city did not attract massive numbers of permanent migrants from the empire, the human connections with Africa contributed in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries to a number of mixed-race relationships in the port locales, influencing many

working-class Liverpudlians' beliefs about race and class. The massive trade with imperial ports in West Africa enabled the World Museum Liverpool to build, in a completely haphazard fashion, one of the greatest collections of African ethnographic objects in the United Kingdom, with objects donated by a wide variety of Liverpudlian ship captains and traders who frequented the continent. Until very recently, Liverpool's prosperity matched quite closely the British experience in world power, rising and falling with the fortunes of imperial nation since the eighteenth century. Although there remains much debate about whether Liverpool's decline was caused by or merely coincided with the fall of Britain's empire, Nicholas White's essay on the difficulties faced by the once-mighty Ocean groups of shipowners due to decolonization and the decline of the city's longtime imperial markets certainly helps to explain the sense of stagnancy and malaise that has often been thought of as marking postwar Liverpool. All of this leads reasonably to John MacKenzie's conclusion that "Liverpool was not just a gateway to empire, it was also to a certain extent its product" (p. 225).

By the end of this volume, one fully understands the argument in favor of Liverpool's relevance and importance to the grand story of British global power. The accumulated argument of this book about the city is made in a classically Liverpudlian fashion–strident and proud of the city's importance, yet halfhearted and slightly embarrassed by its failures and limitations past and present. Perhaps best captured in the words of one of the city's contemporary poets, Liverpool in this volume appears a place whose people (and whose historians) have forever obsessed over how to explain and describe the place of Liverpool as "the edge-of-everywhere-and-nowhere's-centre."[2]

Notes

[1]. P. J. Cain and A. G. Hopkins, *British Imperialism, 1688-2000*, 2nd ed. (Harlow, England: Longman, 2001), 664.

[2]. Jamie McKendrick, "Epithets," *London Review of Books* (July 22, 2010), 10.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the list discussion logs at:
http://h-net.msu.edu/cgi-bin/logbrowse.pl.

Citation: Phillip Dehne. Review of Haggerty, Sheryllynne; Webster, Anthony; White, Nicholas J., eds., *The Empire in One City?: Liverpool's Inconvenient Imperial Past.* H-Urban, H-Net Reviews. January, 2011.
URL: http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=30663

This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.