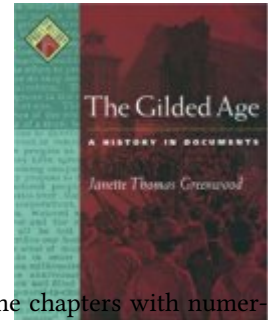


H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Bonnie G. Smith. *Imperialism. A History in Documents*. Pages From History Series. New York: Oxford University Press, 2000. 165 pp. \$30.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-19-510523-0.

Reviewed by Magnus Bernhardtsson (Department of History, Hofstra University)
Published on H-W-Civ (June, 2001)



Perhaps the biggest challenge that I have faced in teaching a Western Civilization survey course is dealing with the lack of literacy. Particularly for the current generation of undergraduates, who have been nursed by the Internet where speed, brevity and information are the command of the day, interpreting actual historical documents is often a daunting task. Because of their preoccupation, or even obsession with “facts” students find it difficult to critically assess texts and offer their own analysis and interpretation. In such an environment, the availability of effective primary source collections for Western Civilization type courses is becoming even more imperative in order to convince students to think instead of consume.

My students generally seem intrigued by imperialism. They can grasp the racist and nationalistic elements of the enterprise and appreciate the moral aspects of the debate. The sections and discussions that focus on imperialism in my courses tend to be the most engaging and animated. Therefore, I was quite excited to learn about a source book focusing exclusively on imperialism by Bonnie G. Smith, a renowned French historian who specializes in women’s history. I anticipated that my students could find this sort of collection interesting and that it could serve as a valuable tool to further their understanding of imperialism. In reviewing this book an important consideration was whether I would assign this book for my students.

This collection of primary sources offers a thematic and comparative look at imperialism. Smith should be commended for writing a clear and concise text. Her choice of sources is by and large informative and even at times entertaining, although it does reveal a certain bias against the Islamic world.

The book is divided into nine chapters with numerous illustrations and photographs. The chapter headings include “Imperialism takes off,” “Technology and Economics,” and “Rivalry and Resistance.” In contrast to many other discussions on imperialism, Smith does not focus exclusively on European imperialism, instead offering numerous examples of Japanese and American imperialism.

Smith starts by discussing “What is a Document?” and “How to Read a Document.” She provides several visual examples which do not seem to have anything to do with imperialism such as a cartoon about the U.S. Supreme Court and excerpts from Beowulf. While it is instructive to point out the variety of historical evidence, it would have been informative to depict also some standard documents relating to imperialism such as a diplomatic treaty between imperial powers or a speech say by Cecil Rhodes.

This preliminary section on documents is followed by the book’s introduction. The introduction does not sufficiently provide the student with an analytical framework with which to interpret the book’s documents. Furthermore, Smith never adequately defines the term “imperialism”. The book’s parameters are therefore not entirely clear. In my experience, one question that my students constantly raise is what exactly (if any) is the difference between imperialism and colonialism? How is the new imperialism different/similar from earlier European expansion? In the introduction, Smith mentions both “modern” imperialism and “new” imperialism, but fails to state sufficiently how they differed from the old. Smith merely maintains that the “old-fashioned” form of colonization was based “on the somewhat limited vision of traders, missionaries and government officials” (p. 10).

To her credit, Smith does point out that imperialism is a complex phenomenon with many plots and subplots. She emphasizes that the imperialists exercised brute force on colonized people but that colonized people could exercise a different kind of hold over their colonizers (p.13). Yet, as Smith mentions herself, and as her choice of documents reveal, the dominant voices “are those of people who had some degree of power and controlled the pens” (p. 15).

The first chapter is entitled “On the Brink of Modern Empire.” Smith utilizes a clever hook to draw students into the subject by describing the introduction of coffee and tea into European society. (Smith is obviously attuned to what students may find interesting. In a later chapter she includes a brief section on the introduction of tattoos into European culture.) This chapter includes writings by Lady Montagu, an English diplomat’s wife in the Ottoman Empire, on smallpox inoculation and several provoking texts on racial characteristics and differences. The chapter also includes a sub-heading “Mixed Responses to Europeans.” Here Smith chooses to perpetuate an unfortunate myth. Her first example is a short segment by Al-Ghaza who visited Spain from Morocco in the eighteenth century. This text describes how Al-Ghaza was shocked by European gender relations. In framing this document Smith gives the impression that Al-Ghaza is typical of the Islamic world in Africa and the Middle East. Smith goes even so far as to state that in these areas a “long-standing view of European culture as being barbaric blocked any accurate assessment of the military power that the Western powers had been amassing” (p. 22).

Although this view may have been relevant to some parts of the Middle East in the early eighteenth century, this was certainly not the case in the nineteenth century, especially after Napoleon’s invasion of Egypt in 1798, when European imperial powers first started to make their presence known. Governmental officials in both the Ottoman Empire and Qajar Iran were preoccupied with modernizing and strengthening their own forces, which to them meant to introduce certain Western practices. Given European infiltration into the Middle East in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, people in the Middle East were all too familiar with European military strength and their willingness to use it. If Smith would have consulted some of the most influential intellectuals in the Middle East of the nineteenth century or early twentieth century, such as Jamal al-Din al-Afghani, Rifah al-Tahtawi, or Ziya Gökalp, she would have discovered influential debates among Middle Easterners on

how to incorporate certain western ideas and practices into their societies. The Egyptian al-Tahtawi, for example, who visited France, argued that there was little difference between Islamic law and European natural law. Al-Tahtawi wrote admiringly of French openness to new ideas and he sought to modernize the Egyptian educational system along European lines. Al-Ghaza’s segment is therefore hardly characteristic of Middle Eastern views of Europe and especially European military technology. Instead it serves to accentuate the regrettable stereotype that Middle Easterners are somehow wholeheartedly anti-Western and thus anti-modern.

This vision of Middle Easterners is further relayed in the text as Smith contrasts Al-Ghaza with a text by a Japanese intellectual Morishima Churyo. Churyo discusses how the characters in the Latin alphabet are superior to the Chinese characters upon which the Japanese alphabet is based. Smith contends that this openness to new ideas prepared Japan for its rapid modernization. There is no mention of the fact that Latin characters were eventually incorporated by a Middle Eastern nation (Turkey) and not by Japan. The juxtaposition of Japan and Middle East in a book on imperialism is troubling. It would have been instructive to at least raise the question whether the Middle East and parts of Africa did not advance as rapidly in economic and technological terms as Europe because of an anti-modern outlook or worldview or whether it was because these areas were heavily scorched by the torch of imperialism (as opposed to Japan) that had debilitating consequences for any economic developments.

The second chapter entitled, “Imperialism Takes Off,” is more useful. Through various documents, Smith explores British, Belgian, Russian, German, Japanese and American justifications and rationales for their various endeavors. It is noteworthy that Smith, a French historian, does not include any examples of French imperialism here, despite their pivotal role on the imperial stage. In fact, it seems that Smith goes out of her way to include British examples at the expense of the French. In other chapters when French cases are utilized, however, they are generally more positive than their counterparts from other countries. Does Smith not include French examples because they were somehow extraordinary, or are they the same?

The next chapters engage the issue of the dynamic relationship between imperial power and the subject peoples. The third chapter of the book focuses on technology and economics. It emphasizes the exploitation of

people and natural resources and includes writings on cotton manufacturing and mining. The fourth and fifth chapters, which examine imperial societies and cultures, are informative and the examples diverse and interesting. Themes such as the remaking of the ruling class, hunting, sports, new identities, and education are explored via a myriad of writings. The sixth chapter is comprised primarily of bland photographs and illustrations that emphasize how the international nature of imperialism transformed Western foods, music, architecture and patterns of thought. These illustrations were not particularly thought-provoking but were rather descriptive.

In her introduction to chapter seven, "Rivalry and Resistance," Smith mentions how rivalry for territory could lead to intense clashes among the imperial powers yet none of the examples directly addresses that topic. Instead, the chapter focuses on various challenges to imperial expansion, such as the Boxer Rebellion in China and a resolution against imperialism at a German socialist meeting in 1900. This chapter is rather lackluster and ends with a curious example. In a sub-heading entitled "Challenging the West," Smith includes principles of an anonymous pan-Arab society (no date given) that Smith states "attracted a growing following" (p. 133). Smith maintains that "instead of Western culture, the pan-Arab movement stressed the value of Arab ethnic heritage" (p. 133). Once again, Smith wrongly postulates Arabs as being diametrically opposed to Western culture. It is well-established that the pan-Arabists were heavily infused by European Romanticism, especially the concept of the "nation." A more accurate portrayal of the pan-Arabists is one of intellectuals and politicians who sought to implement certain Western political ideas into Middle Eastern societies without fully discounting their own heritage. Like in other parts of the world, the response of Middle Easterners to imperial power was more complex than the either/or scenario that Smith depicts.

The next chapter concentrates on World War I. The various examples from outside the Western front are particularly moving. For example, a short account of life in the trenches by a corporal from Dahomey and a riveting patriotic poem by Leopold Sedar Senghor, a Senegalese poet, emphasize that people felt the impact of Great War all over the world. Despite these interesting examples, important aspects of World War I were omitted. It would have been informative to include documents relating to the post-war settlements and the establishment of Mandate states as they prolonged and to a certain extent institutionalized imperial realities even to the present day. The final chapter is devoted to the "torturous path toward liberation" and includes writings by Mohandas Gandhi

and a fascinating passage from Mmadiate Makgale, a South African woman arrested for brewing beer. The book then ends with a short epilogue.

The biggest weakness of this book from a pedagogical point of view is that it is fairly homogenous. The layout does not differentiate sufficiently between the primary sources and the text. For students taking an introductory class, who are generally not accustomed to critically assessing primary documents, the seamlessness between the documents and the explanatory text is potentially problematic. Students could, therefore, have a difficult time assessing whether the text in question is Smith or a historical figure. The names and identities of the authors, their location, and their dates are not always given. It would have been more helpful to have certain concrete facts (such as names) so that the discussion would not seem as synthetic. When names are stated they are often hidden in the text. The book could have used more headlines and sub-headings to help the student navigate through the text. Consequently, the book is visually confusing and not particularly user-friendly.

Generally speaking, Smith has chosen interesting, instructive documents to include in this volume. She could have been more careful in her assessment of writings from the Islamic world in general and the Middle East in particular. Sometimes the document's relevance to the overall topic is questionable (such as a segment on footbinding in China). By and large the most important subplots in imperialism are covered in one way or another. The book, however, lacks documents relating to the competitive nature and scrambling mentality of imperialism. It would have been beneficial to include writings that captured the ethos of collecting lands, peoples, resources, and antiquities that so enamored the imperialists. Furthermore, including theoretical discussions on imperialism could have served a useful function. Finally, Smith does not fully explore the economics of the imperial enterprise, or whether the imperial activity was actually worth it from a financial point of view. Overall, the book's formlessness, despite containing many intriguing and unusual examples, could be problematic in a classroom setting consisting of uncritical students waiting to be spoon-fed with information.

Copyright 2001 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the Reviews editorial staff at hbooks@mail.h-net.msu.edu.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-w-civ>

Citation: Magnus Bernhardsson. Review of Smith, Bonnie G., *Imperialism. A History in Documents*. H-W-Civ, H-Net Reviews. June, 2001.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=5215>

Copyright © 2001 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the Reviews editorial staff at hbooks@mail.h-net.msu.edu.