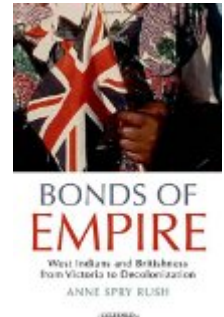


**Anne Spry Rush.** *Bonds of Empire: West Indians and Britishness from Victoria to Decolonization.* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011. 320 pp. \$99.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-19-958855-8.



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*Well, believe me, I am speaking broad-mindedly*

*I am glad to know my mother country*

*I've been traveling to countries years ago*

*But this is the place I wanted to know*

*London, that's the place for me*

So sang Calypsonian Lord Kitchener in his 1951 song, "London is the Place for Me." Drawn to England by a sense of belonging to the British Empire, the story of his generation of West Indian migrants has been written as one of disappointment in the racism, violence, and ignorance that they encountered in Britain.[1] Even though West Indians thought of themselves as British, Britons' more restrictive sense of national identity excluded colonial subjects from truly belonging.

Anne Spry Rush's *Bonds of Empire* investigates this dissonance by thoughtfully tracing the ways Britishness was formed and engaged with in the West Indies during the first half of the twentieth century. *Bonds of Empire* joins a growing body of scholarship that investigates the ways colonial

subjects, notably in India, cast themselves as citizens of the British Empire.[2] This book provides insight into the attitudes of middle-class West Indians, and it documents the social benefits of being British in a colonial setting. It also raises important questions for historians about the larger context of these attitudes in the West Indies, in the wider imperial world, and for Britishness more generally. The new imperial history for the past thirty years has shown the modes of thought and feeling that governed British administrators, adventurers, missionaries, and memsahibs; Rush advances this scholarship by taking into account the responses of colonized people as they attempted to "establish a place for themselves in the British imperial world" (p. 1).

Rush divides the study into three roughly chronological sections: the first outlines the conditions for what she calls the "egalitarian empire"; the second explores West Indian debates about their place in the empire in the interwar period; and the third covers the Second World War and the immediate postwar years when Britishness

lost its hold to national identities forged in independence movements. Rush resists the temptation to dismiss the affective connection to Britain felt by West Indians as naiveté, or merely mimicry.[3] Instead, through examination of debates surrounding the monarchy, education, the BBC, and more, she attempts to answer a fundamental question about the British Empire: how could a world system built on oppression and exploitation also inculcate a sense of belonging on the part of subject peoples?

Rush suggests that West Indians forged their own idea of Britishness, one that was racially and geographically inclusive, but discriminatory on the basis of respectability. Rush acknowledges the limits of her account, pointing out the over-abundance of sources from Jamaica, her exclusion of religious organizations and sports, and her lack of analysis of gender or ethnicity. Her study of middle-class West Indians and their identification with Britishness will be a useful resource for any scholar interested in education and civic participation in colonial settings, affective relationships to monarchs, the early history of radio, or colonial participation in the world wars.

In Rush's view, an inclusive and malleable sense of Britishness, centered on the monarchy and respectability, held together the empire. She begins with the period immediately following emancipation, and argues that the cultivation of Britishness provided black West Indians with the surest route to improved social standing. With the end of slavery occurring almost simultaneously with Victoria's coronation in 1838, West Indians understood the queen as an emancipator. Rush details how West Indians viewed Victoria as the mother of a great and diverse imperial family, in which all of her subjects had the same relation to the sovereign. West Indians repeatedly denounced the actions of local colonial administrators, while idealizing Victoria and her heirs as the embodiment of egalitarian imperialism.

Rush explores reactions to Edward VIII's 1936 abdication crisis, when West Indians identified with the king-emperor in his persecution at the hands of those in power. And yet, the views of West Indian letter writers to local newspapers overwhelmingly called for Edward's abdication, as a way to preserve the respectability of the monarchy while submitting to the will of "the people." Rush argues this expansive view of "the people" allowed West Indians to participate as citizens of the empire bestowing their consent to "their" king. The monarchy strand of the book concludes with Queen Elizabeth II's coronation and subsequent tour of the West Indies. Local festivities celebrated West Indians' place in the empire as much as the new queen, and Jamaicans used the opportunity of the young queen's visit to make a plea for improved conditions. They wanted the New Elizabethan era to benefit the West Indies as much as it would inaugurate a new era in Britain.

Since the introduction of schooling in the Caribbean in the 1870s, British books and teachers instructed West Indians in the imperial values of the metropole, and the knowledge itself became the "single most important ingredient to gain the respect of the entire community" (p. 45). A British-style secondary education was the entrée for aspirational West Indians to gain white-collar employment, or perhaps, for a very small minority, to travel to Britain. Rush argues that for these graduates, education could trump "color or creed in establishing class" (p. 22). When modernizing administrators came to the colonies and attempted to reform curricula to reflect local circumstances, many local fee-payers and elected school board members demanded the old curriculum remain. For the small number of students who attended secondary schools (less than 1 percent of the population of the West Indies until 1945), their exams were set and graded in Cambridge and the results published throughout their island. Success brought honor to the students' families and schools while poor marks resulted in public

shame. According to Rush, embracing British education allowed West Indians to see themselves competing on a global stage, bringing pride not only to the students and their families, but to the entire colony.

If education was one limited way of cultivating Britishness, the radio further expanded the reach of British cultural forms and values. Rush presents her most compelling material in the chapters on the BBC, expounding on the tensions between imperial agendas and local circumstances as people in London and Jamaica debated the types of programming most suitable for West Indian audiences. Rush argues that the BBC proved to be a crucial tool in creating an image of egalitarian empire, promoting loyalty to Britain throughout the dominions and colonies. Early BBC programming was dominion-oriented and assumed a natural relationship to Britain on the part of its audiences. In the West Indies, it attracted an educated audience drawn by programming familiar to their British sensibilities. With commercial and popular American radio stations gaining larger shares of West Indian audiences, the BBC increased its programming targeting and featuring West Indians, allowing island voices to be heard on domestic and colonial services and promoting a sense of regional identity. Rush discusses the wartime necessity of portraying a strong, united empire, not only through the colonial service, but in Britain too, while paying attention to the divisions between the islands raised by an expanded West Indian service.

Rush emphasizes the desire on the part of West Indians to contribute to defending “their” empire, but also demonstrates the ways their perceptions of empire were tested by experience of the larger world. In her chapters on the League of Coloured People and the world wars, Rush shows that West Indians refused to accept Britishness as white and argued for a common imperial identity. In Britain, Harold Moody led the League of Coloured Peoples to combat racial discrimination

and argued for West Indian inclusion in British on the basis of shared Christianity and respectability. In the Caribbean, during both the world wars, West Indians proudly raised funds and volunteered to fight in support of “the way of life of the British Empire” (p. 132). When the colonial government proved hesitant to confront U. S. servicemen over acts of racism during the Second World War, West Indians reconsidered the egalitarianism of the empire. West Indians who traveled abroad, either to work in American fields as farm laborers (as more than 16,000 did) or to contribute to the war effort more directly encountered racism, and in some cases, they themselves discriminated against less “British” colonial subjects. Rush rarely discusses prejudice in the West Indies, and when she does, she explains the discrimination as similar to the class-based ways Britons in Britain treated people they perceived to be below them.

How can we better understand the global conjuncture of middle-class respectability and empire that Rush charts here? What is its relationship to the political and economic stories beyond the frame of this book? How do we understand imperial egalitarianism in relation to imperial violence, which is mentioned only briefly, in the context of the dismissal of the democratically elected Cheddi Jagan government in British Guiana? While Rush frequently acknowledges the limited numbers of West Indians that are included in her study, what of the unrespectable rest? What did the mass of West Indians think of their respectable neighbors?

As much as we wonder how colonized people could have identified with the violent, repressive empire, we also must ask how Britain could have let go of a world that saw itself as British. Why do the cultural bonds of empire persist when the political and economic relationships have severed? What did it mean that Indians loved (and still love) P. G. Wodehouse? That coronation photographs of Queen Elizabeth II still grace pubs in

Canada? What possibilities did these ideas and objects present to those colonial subjects who considered the British Empire “their” empire? And how were those possibilities limited by a world system that subjugated the mass of its people in the name of modernization, improvement, and indeed, respectability?

Anne Spry Rush makes a compelling case for the importance of cultural ties in understanding the power of empires. *Bonds of Empire* makes clear that there is much more to understand if we are truly to make sense of the British Empire, one populated by not only the colonizers, but the colonized as well.

#### Notes

[1]. There is now a substantial body of academic work on the history of West Indians in Britain, but the firsthand narratives collected beginning in the 1980s remain compelling. *Forty Winters On: Memories of Britain's Post-war Caribbean Immigrants* (London: Lambeth Borough Council, 1988) set the tone for oral history accounts.

[2]. Sukanya Bannerjee's *Becoming Imperial Citizens: Indians in the Late-Victorian Empire* (Durham, NC and London: Duke University Press, 2010), is only a recent entry in a South Asian historiography that has queried imperial belonging, citizenship, and the formation of national identity before the formation of a rights-conferring nation-state. For the metropolitan view, see Daniel Gorman, *Imperial Citizenship: Empire and the Question of Belonging* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2006).

[3]. Rush raises the concept of mimicry in her introduction. Mimicry has been an important concept from the beginnings of postcolonial criticism (Frantz Fanon, Kamau Braithwaite, V. S. Naipaul, Homi Bhabha). While Rush does not interrogate the term, she makes a compelling move here from the colonizers' perception of native mimicry to

the ways West Indians valued British cultural forms.

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