

**John McAleer, John M. MacKenzie, eds.** *Exhibiting the Empire: Cultures of Display and the British Empire*. Studies in Imperialism Series. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2015. Illustrations. 304 pp. \$39.95, paper, ISBN 978-1-5261-1835-6.

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An episode of the 1980s Cosgrove Hall stop-motion series adapted from Kenneth Grahame's classic *The Wind in the Willows* (1908) portrays Yuletide at Toad Hall, full of singing, dancing, and other entertainments. In one vignette, the wise and erudite Mr. Badger draws out his lantern slides to regale the collected denizens of The Riverbank and The Wild Wood with a picture show. Rabbits, squirrels, field mice, and even weasels sit back and listen to Mr. Badger tell about his travels across Britain's colonial possessions, with varying degrees of interest: some pay rapt attention, others chat amongst themselves, the weasels yawn.

And so it was with empire. Set of course in a fanciful Edwardian England in the heyday of imperial power, *The Wind in the Willows* in this instance brilliantly captures the impulses explored in detail in John McAleer and John M. MacKenzie's commendable edited collection, *Exhibiting the Empire*. In a useful cross-disciplinary series of essays, the editors and nine other contributors take us through their own tour of the empire from the eighteenth to the early twentieth centuries. Empire was everywhere, and even those not particularly interested were nevertheless subjected to it in myriad ways.

This volume is another distinguished offering from the Studies in Imperialism series issued by

Manchester University Press. The series aims to explore the cultural phenomenon of empire as it affected dominant as well as subordinate societies. The present volume mines a developing vein of scholarship in visual and material culture to this end, and contributes usefully to our understanding of imperial processes. Leading scholars and several promising relative newcomers provide case studies that offer a fascinating look at empire on display. It is a varied group—five historians, three art historian/curators, an ethno/musicologist, a postcolonial studies scholar, and a digital humanities specialist—and although the offerings emerge from different fields they work well together.

The book comprises an introduction and ten chapters. The first four chapters cover the eighteenth century, with essays on country houses and empire, the voyages of Captain Cook to the Pacific, satirical prints about the process of eighteenth-century peacemaking, and depictions of naval battles during the French Revolutionary Wars. Four of the final six essays examine the pageantry of empire between 1851 and the 1920s in the form of exhibitions. Starting with the Great Exhibition of 1851, examining Durbars in India, and concluding with the British Empire Exhibition at Wembley in 1924-5, which attracted an astonishing twenty-sev-

en million people, these essays make clear how pervasive public engagement was with these imperial spectacles. In addition, there is a stimulating chapter on ephemera, all the tracts, paper bags, posters, food packaging, advertising, and labels, “frequently encountered in the quotidian experience of people of every age and of all classes” (p. 142), and an essay by Berny Sèbe that makes a quantitative argument about how widespread books about empire were in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

The book is intended to underpin the importance of empire, and how Britons experienced their overseas possessions. Indeed, the editors open with a clear salvo in the debate about the empire’s influence on domestic Britain. Britain’s overseas empire, they begin, “had a profound impact on people in the United Kingdom.” Moreover, “the country’s imperial status seemed to pervade every aspect of British culture” (p. 1). This view comes as no surprise from two leading advocates of the idea that British imperialism played a significant role in the metropole, but what is fresh and different about this collection is how it draws together work on display and exhibition.

Although recent studies have provided a more nuanced view of the transmission of imperial themes, ideas, and images, McAleer and MacKenzie argue that “less attention has been paid to the literal display and exhibition of empire.” Scholars have neglected the materiality of empire, often ignoring the rich evidence provided by visual art, architecture, sculpture, interior decoration, theatrical performances, and even product advertisements and other ephemera. *Exhibiting the Empire* “seeks to begin the process of correcting that imbalance” (p. 2). A point noted in the introduction and then developed in several essays is the transnational dimension of display and exhibition. Many of the media discussed were inherently mobile and international, and hence accessible not only in Britain but also across the geographical sweep of the British Empire. These pervasive

forms of displaying empire are at the core of the essays, and the volume as a whole persuasively highlights numerous ways that Britons encountered empire and imperialism in everyday life.

A central question arising from *Exhibiting the Empire* is when, how, and in what ways, rather than if, empire played a role in British consciousness. This volume offers keen insights about a host of British encounters with their empire, but it is not as strong on timing. The four essays on the eighteenth century essentially stop with the Peace of Amiens in 1802-3. These pieces reinforce much of what we already know: that exotic representations of foreign lands were rife in the eighteenth century, and commonplace by the early nineteenth. The final six essays pick up with the Great Exhibition and swiftly move into the twentieth century. The late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries are also well-trodden ground and these later essays fruitfully develop the themes of pageantry, ritual, and display, highlighting empire at its height but also noting the cracks beginning to form.

Perhaps the most glaring oversight is a lack of coverage of the first half of the nineteenth century, something of a missed opportunity. The years between Waterloo and the Great Exhibition seem ripe for further study, where historians and others can most profitably explore the debate about empire’s impact and the way imperial themes were displayed for the British populace. It would have been good to hear something about imperial exhibition in the period characterized long ago as one of “anti-imperialism.” The absence of at least one essay on the formative period from 1815 until 1851 almost reinforces the hoary notion that perhaps empire went on hiatus, something that we know was not the case.

The book also raises the question of what constitutes the empire implicitly rather than explicitly. The early essays focused on the eighteenth century often conflate exploration, empire, and

global engagement. This makes the useful point that empire was never one thing, but the editors might have done more to define their idea of empire, in order to contextualize better several of the offerings. For example, Douglas Fordham's fine essay on satirical peace prints and Eleanor Hughes's visual exploration of *The Glorious First of June* (1794) seem to be less about empire and rather more about international relations. Of course, imperial affairs and the global conflict with France were closely intertwined, but the essays allow readers to draw their own conclusions about the interaction between eighteenth-century prints and visual images rather than driving home an argument about the particularly *imperial* nature of these devices.

Methodologically, to have contributions from several disciplines is a welcome achievement, and builds on much existing scholarship that has moved in this direction. They are largely accessible across fields, although as with cross- and interdisciplinary work in general, scholars may find some of the essays more comfortable than others. As a not especially musical person, for example, I wrestled in places with Nalini Ghuman's chapter on Sir Edward Elgar's composing contributions to the 1924 British Empire Exhibition, while appreciating her overall point and being convinced of her argument repositioning Elgar as a central contributor to the exhibition through his popular *Pageant of Empire* extravaganza. Other readers may be challenged by such concepts as Fordham's "cartographic unconscious," which underpins his argument, wherein the British public denied or misconstrued imperial knowledge in accepting satirical versions of events depicted in the prints he considers. But just these sorts of conversations across disciplines serve to enrich, rather than diminish, our understanding.

The overall presentation suggests this is very much a book for historians, however. Despite the range of the volume, and despite its focus on visual and material culture, the production emphas-

izes text over image. The visuals are mostly unexceptional and given the evocative subject matter larger and fuller illustrations would have been helpful. Some of the images are small and difficult to make out, and some absent altogether. For instance, Stephanie Barczewski's essay on country houses paints a word picture of Gianantonio Pellegrini's paintings for the dome and great hall at Castle Howard but images do not appear. This issue can be rectified with a quick Google search to see what is discussed, but good images are not always readily available of the fascinating breadth of the art and objects described and discussed. Finally, a few infelicities exist—a wrong date here, conflation of two Frank Lascelles, one a diplomat, the other the so-called man who staged the empire there—but these detract little from the overall quality of the essays.

*Exhibiting the Empire* is an excellent contribution to the continued debate about the empire's role in Britain. There is a good deal packed into this relatively short volume, which certainly raises a number of new topics and approaches that warrant further attention from scholars of empire, British and otherwise. The recently published paperback edition should make this fine collection available to a wider readership, and prompt further work on how the British displayed, exhibited, and encountered their empire.

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