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Dane Keith Kennedy. *The Imperial History Wars: Debating the British Empire*. London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2018. 232 pp. \$29.95 (paper), ISBN 978-1-4742-7886-7.

Reviewed by Nathaniel Bassett (University of Akron)

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Commissioned by Jeffrey R. Wigelsworth (Red Deer College)

Any good historiographic project is, at its heart, a war—a fact that Dane Kennedy acknowledges and embraces in his desire to construct a comprehensible time line of the changing landscape of British imperial history over the past forty years. Historical shifts, beginning with Edward Said’s *Orientalism* (1978), have turned the placid imperial ocean into a turbulent sea, plied by the monographical vessels of postcolonialism, new imperial studies, and the British World among others, each seeking to plant their flags as the dominant methodology for comprehending Britain’s empire. Into this battle wades Kennedy’s *The Imperial History Wars: Debating the British Empire*, with a desire to make sense of the ebbs and flows the field has experienced all within the scope of his own career.

While the seeds of Kennedy’s conflict began with Said, the first real shots were fired in the 1980s and 1990s with the rise of postcolonial studies. The reorientation of empire studies, away from not only the metropole but the British Empire itself, challenged the concept of the “official mind” of empire encapsulated by the likes of Ronald Robinson and John Gallagher in their influential *Africa and the Victorians* of the 1960s. Rather than study the empire, scholars turned towards those who had been conquered and the lives they lived in spite of the British. By looking away from the structures of empire, the use of literature and sociological analyses provided fresh interpretations of the lived experience on the periphery of empire. Therein lies both the problem and potential of postcolonial study, according to Kennedy—the decolonizing of the mind demanded by “Said’s progeny” has merely flipped the discursive script Said originally suggested. In such works as *The Empire Writes Back: Theory and Prac-*

tice in Post-Colonial Literatures (1989), scholars seeking to deconstruct the hegemonic historiography of the West had instead, Kennedy proclaims, crafted an ahistorical mythography, ignoring the “profoundly different historical experiences [within] the literatures of Africa, Australia, the Caribbean, [and] the United States,” solely to connect them through the decentralization of the Western/imperial experience (p. 13). By chapter 3, Kennedy turns towards the application of postcolonialism through more traditional historical methods such as identity and geography. Instead of binary opposition, postcolonialism’s toolbox allowed for fluidity between colonized and colonizer.

Many of these formulations of postcolonial studies, Kennedy argues, found little support in the traditional view of imperial studies spearheaded by the likes of John Mackenzie, who maintained the centrality of the metropole in understanding the empire. Instead, they turned to what Kennedy terms “Oxford’s Empire” and the desire to reconstitute a master narrative of empire. The resulting *Oxford History of the British Empire*, initially comprised of five volumes published between 1998 and 1999, attempted to create both a cohesive and multi-directional image of the British Empire. This constituted the first major attempt to define the empire as a whole since the release of the *Cambridge History of the British Empire*, published between 1929 and 1963. Kennedy’s interests and critiques lie primarily with the last three volumes of the original series, which focus on the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, as well as a volume dedicated to the historiography of empire. On the one hand, Kennedy argues, the *Oxford History of the British Empire*’s three thousand-plus pages present a “raucous range of voices

[seeking] to be heard on the matter of the empire and its legacy” (p. 25). The pluralistic approach expounded by series editor William Roger Louis is thus accomplished, but at the cost of consistency in narrative, theme, or even chronology. On the other hand, Kennedy notes that approximately two-thirds of the contributors received their training from Oxford, Cambridge, or the University of London, resulting in a shared vision of imperial history defined by none other than Robinson and Gallagher. In other words, in rejecting the interpretation of an “official mind” of empire, the *Oxford History of the British Empire* attempted instead to establish an official mind of empire studies.

With these two factions now firmly entrenched, Kennedy turns to new battlefields brought under fire by the postcolonial turn in imperial studies, particularly ideas of exploration and settler colonialism. Exploration, Kennedy argues, was a natural outgrowth of empire studies, a field that had traditionally been left to historical geographers, historians of science, and literary scholars. Exploration, in a post-Saidian historiography, was at its core an imperial project, not merely a roster of achievements and exploits. Likewise, the role of exploration in imperial studies provided more than an origin story for political and economic dimensions of power; it “revealed a more insidious and enduring form of power, the power to determine the way we view the world, its regions, and their inhabitants” (p. 60). From here two key themes develop: the roles of the institution and the individual. The former concerned itself within the metropole, particularly with the uses of discovery as a means to power traced through the networks of patronage. The latter concerned itself with exploration as an act of empire-building, taking into account “the actions, experiences, and perceptions of explorers in the field ... as an advance guard of imperial expansion” (p. 68). Settler colonial studies, meanwhile, came about as a product of frustration in the postcolonial and even Oxford-dominated narratives of empire, which seemed to neglect the “Anglo-World” of the British Empire. This is perhaps the most problematic field in Kennedy’s eyes, dominated by the question “Who counts as British?” (p. 76). While scholars within the field looked to the likes of Linda Colley and J. G. A. Pocock to ground their basis in British identity (an opposition formed largely in isolation from

the identity studies of postcolonialism), the borders of the British World remained hazy. Beyond the conflicts within British heritage among colonial subjects, what is to be done about non-British colonist communities?” As Kennedy explains, “cultural identities cannot be so easily flattened out and fused together, especially in colonial societies where so many different groups came into contact—and often collision—with one another” (p. 77).

For those seeking a victor among this historiographical fray, *The Imperial History Wars* will surely be a disappointment. But it was never Kennedy’s intent to pick sides—his real intent, gradually uncovered from within his historiographical analysis, is a challenge to scholars of the field, new and old; an answer to the question Kennedy himself posed in his 2016 article in *Perspectives on History*: “Does British History Matter Anymore?” The answer is both obvious and elusive—of course it does. The war for Britain’s imperial past is far from over, but the combatants have changed dramatically. While scholars struggled for ground amidst the cultural turn, modern political concerns took hold of the idea of empire, particularly driven by the likes of American neoconservatives who saw the British Empire as a collection of field guides for American dominance in the post-9/11 world. This was not solely the purview of conservatives, Kennedy reminds us, but rather was embraced by both sides of the aisle with the belief in “an obligation to fix ‘failed states’ and build democratic institutions” (p. 138). British politics have not been spared this reemergence of imperial identity, particularly among many “Leave” campaigners during the debate over Brexit, who saw independence from Europe as the necessary precursor to “Empire 2.0” (p. 150). This is the imperial history war that Kennedy has attempted to prepare his readers for; not one of historiographical conflict, but one of memory and legacy in the public sphere. One need look no further than the admiration for Winston Churchill in modern conservative politics. More than the image of stalwart leadership, Churchill brings alive the imperial legacy—the belief that it “is neither racist nor imperialist to rule other peoples against their will so long as it is done for what the rulers deem to be their subjects’ benefit” (p. 154). So long as some seek to distort the imperial past for their political present, Kennedy reminds us, (British) history still matters.

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