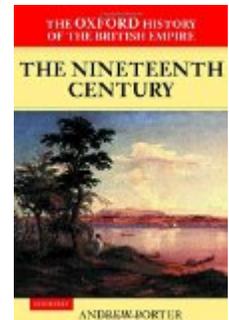


**Andrew Porter, ed..** *The Oxford History of the British Empire, Vol.III: The Nineteenth Century*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999. xxii + 774 pp. \$49.95, cloth, ISBN 978-0-19-820565-4.



**Reviewed by** Saul Dubow

**Published on** H-Albion (April, 2002)

This volume, the third of five under the general editorship of William Roger Louis, is devoted to Britain's 'imperial century.' Like all imperial surveys--the genre is itself well over a century old if one includes works like Froude's *Oceana*--such ventures amount to a form of collective stock-taking. It follows that the process is necessarily thorough, even laborious, but there are always plentiful pleasant surprises and mislaid gems to be discovered or rediscovered en route.

In the nature of a collective enterprise the result is inevitably uneven in quality as well as in purpose--surely none could surpass the argumentative drive and sheer brio of Keith Hancock's remarkable *Survey of British Commonwealth Affairs, 1918-39* (1942) which remains for me the finest example of the survey genre. However, overall coherence and direction is not necessarily a weakness; indeed, in these post-colonial days, many readers might be suspicious of seamless aims or outcomes. Both the series editor and Andrew Porter, the editor of this volume, acknowledge in their introductory remarks that the empire can no longer be seen as a story of tri-

umphant, purposeful progress. The scope of imperial historiography is now so large and its approaches so varied that problems of definition, as well as decisions about what to include and exclude, render the overall conception particularly difficult and unavoidably complex to realise.

The volume is sensibly and pragmatically arranged into two parts. The first comprises fifteen thematic chapters, framed by contributions at either end on the economics and political economy of empire; the second is composed of fourteen regional chapters and ends with two sparkling essays: Tom McCaskie on the cultural encounter or dialogue between Britain and Africa, and Avner Offer's speculative consideration of the overall costs and benefits of empire from 1870 until the first world war. Arguably, a couple of the thematic chapters might have been better placed in part II (those on Latin America and on China) but because these rely on the notion of 'informal empire,' they are deemed to lie outside of the colonial-centred case studies.

Peter Cain opens the thematic section with a lively chapter on the economics of empire, as seen

from the point of view of the metropole, that neatly picks through established debates and presents them in freshly distilled form. By contrast, B.R. Tomlinson's corresponding chapter on the economics of the 'periphery' is rather diffuse and almost too judicious. Will anyone be satisfied with his definition of economic imperialism as 'the use of power to determine relations between actors who are bound together mainly by political or economic institutions that have been imposed from outside, and who lack a common, internally generated sense of moral or cultural solidarity'? (p 73). Marjorie Harper's slight contribution on British migration and the peopling of empire (focussed mostly on Canada) is followed by a more adventurous and insightful chapter by David Northrup on intra-imperial labour movements between Africa, Asia and the South Pacific. The elusive problem of informal empire is addressed by Martin Lynn and also by Alan Knight, whose chapter on Latin America addresses ideological as well as material influences, and contrasts well with the literature on Africa. The utility of the concept of informal empire and the impact of the British presence on areas not under its direct control is also usefully addressed by Jürgen Osterhammel in the case of China.

The editor's stated desire to take account of the burgeoning scholarship on the cultural and ideological aspects of empire is reflected in the six chapters that follow. Peter Burrough's wide-ranging essay on the exercise of power and the role of political institutions revisits familiar problems of governance in suggestive new ways. Andrew Porter contributes two broadly ranging and astute chapters (in addition to his editorial introduction): on the anti-slavery movement and humanitarianism, and on the role of missionaries and religion. This is followed by Robert Kubicek's chapter on technological innovations. John Mackenzie, who has done so much to pioneer studies of imperial cultures, has an excellent offering on this theme which he introduces by contrasting Edward Said's notion of a pervasive imperial culture

with Max Beloff's inclination to dismiss the salience of imperialism in the domestic British imagination. Robert Stafford's chapter on scientific exploration and empire is a most stimulating account (based on his study of Roderick Murchison and the Royal Geographical Society) which grounds scientific developments within a sophisticated sense of cultural and political history. Given the growing interest in this field it is a pity that this is the only contribution on such themes--the omission of medicine and health is especially noticeable.

Peter Burrough's helpful essay on defence and imperial disunity (significant issues which have tended to fall by the wayside in much recent writing) follows the clutch of chapters on aspects of imperial culture, but could perhaps have been sited elsewhere, and perhaps to more effect, had it been placed closer to the chapters on economics and migration. The thematic section ends with Euan Green's chapter on the 'political economy of empire' which is really a discussion of 'constructive imperialism'--namely, late-nineteenth century efforts to reconfigure metropolitan interests and dominion colonial nationalist sentiments by linking the imperial idea to the forging of a sense of British racial unity.

The regional studies begin with A.J. Stockwell's consideration of British expansion in South-East India, followed by three strong chapters focussing on the Indian sub-continent. David Washbrook's deft working of the 'two faces of colonialism' develops the notion of imperialism's dual aspect as a modernising force on the one hand and an agent of conservative reaction on the other. Robin Moore takes the story into the post-Mutiny era in his treatment of institutional and political reforms under the Raj. And Susan Bayley offers an illuminating discussion of the complex cultural interactions between colonisers and colonised in a chapter that can usefully be read in association with Tom McCaskie's consideration of related themes in the African context.

Gad Heuman's chapter looks at slavery and its aftermath in the West Indies while David Fitzpatrick investigates Ireland's ambiguous imperial status as a colonised country whose people themselves played a prominent role as colonisers. One wonders whether the editors considered commissioning comparable chapters on Scotland and Wales. Ged Martin's probing of the indeterminate nature of Canadian national identity is one of the most stimulating and imaginative in this section as he challenges numerous common assumptions, including the notion that British North Americans became more 'Canadian' over the course of the century; in Martin's view Canada became more rather than less British during this period. Australasia is covered by two chapters: an ambitious effort to reposition Australia together with the Western Pacific by Donald Denoon and Marivic Whyndam, and a similarly wide-ranging treatment of New Zealand and Polynesia by Raewyn Dalziel. The chapter on Southern Africa, by Christopher Saunders and Iain Smith, focusses mainly on political developments but also contains a strong attack on materialist interpretations of the origins of the South African War (drawing directly on Smith's research. Examiners take note: 'the British government did not go to war in 1899 to protect British trade or the profits of capitalists in the Transvaal' (p. 616).

Colin Newbury's contribution on the partition of Africa is another chapter that sits awkwardly in the collection, not only because the partition may equally be considered to be suitable for 'thematic' treatment, but especially because the focus of this chapter is much more narrow than the essay title indicates. Rather than providing an overview discussion of a well-developed and linked set of debates, the author hones in on specialised and technical issues of fiscal policy, resource allocation and trade, but without explaining his decision to exclude other equally significant aspects. Afaf Lutfi Al-Sayyid-Marsot provides the final regionally-based contribution in her discussion of the occupation of Egypt after 1882 but she deals

only in passing with the Sudan. Two stimulating chapters, by McCaskie and Avner Offer (both already referred to) complete the volume.

Although several of the contributors tend to 'play safe', awed perhaps by the monumental nature of the enterprise, a number of chapters are outstanding and manage both to survey the existing secondary literature and also to open up new ideas for consideration. Arguments about editorial selection are not worth pursuing for it could not be possible to satisfy all historical constituencies and interests in any one collection. But it has to be said that the selection of contributors reflects a degree of editorial conservatism: in several cases younger or more adventurous scholars might have been invited to contribute. This reviewer is unaware whether contributors had the opportunity to read each other's work prior to publication but in many instances this appears not to have been the case; had it been, the editor's stated aim of 'scholarly cross-fertilization and merger' (p.x) may have been more evident. In the end, the reader is left with a sense of the fragmented and varied nature of imperial scholarship and also of the very different concerns and strengths of nationally-based historiographical traditions. If there is such a thing as a field of imperial history, one argument for its survival must be the opportunity to look comparatively at the different historiographical complexions of country-specific scholarship--countries which, on the evidence produced here, continue to share a common imperial experience.

Copyright 2002 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 other uses contact the Reviews editorial staff: [hbooks@mail.h-net.msu.edu](mailto: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-albion>

**Citation:** Saul Dubow. Review of Porter, Andrew, ed. *The Oxford History of the British Empire, Vol.III: The Nineteenth Century*. H-Albion, H-Net Reviews. April, 2002.

**URL:** <https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=6149>



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