

centres and countryside which, worldwide, conditioned the struggles in the Cold War that, in turn, got overwritten by the claims of the competing universals of communism and capitalism. It is this middle ground – of the imperatives of survival in a global condition – that gets passed over in the framing of universalism vs. localism. Happily most of the essays are not constrained by this dichotomy and offer lucid and at times striking insights into the very material conditions of globality that shaped twentieth-century world history.

The empire strikes back? The impact of imperialism on Britain from the mid-nineteenth century

By Andrew Thompson. Harlow: Pearson Education, 2005. Pp. xviii + 374. £21.99. ISBN 0-582-43829-2

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The title of Andrew Thompson's book is misleading, reminiscent as it is of Ashcroft, Griffith and Tiffin's *The empire writes back* from 1989 – a title well established within the postcolonialist canon. But Thompson is no postcolonialist, and his book is intended to transcend what he sees as 'an increasingly sterile debate between "postcolonialists" (who maintain [the impact of empire] was prevalent and pervasive) and their critics (who are convinced that its influence has been grossly exaggerated)' (p. 9). The book is further directed against 'elements of both the Left and the Right [who] have long treated imperialism as an "unpleasant aberration" in British history' – exemplified by what Thompson sees as the 'Little Englandism' and 'the insular and romantic "people's history" of the History Workshop movement' (p. 1), and by the Indian 'historian' Ashis Nandy's belief that 'imperial attitudes were thoroughly internalised by the British' and worked to stifle 'the development of a more open and democratic society' (pp. 201, 223). On the positive side, *The empire strikes back?* situates itself within 'a self-consciously revisionist historiography of the 1980s and 1990s' which has aimed at offering 'a more expansive view of Britain's past' – as exemplified by the series edited by John Mackenzie for Manchester University Press on different aspects of British imperialism.

It is difficult to see in what sense Thompson's book is 'revisionist'. It adds to a long tradition of writing on the popularity or not of empire, and on the impact of imperialism on domestic politics, culture and society in Britain. This includes Mackenzie's *Propaganda and empire* (1986), but also Bernard Porter's *Critics of empire* (1968) and *The absent-minded imperialists* (2004) (neither of which are mentioned by Thompson – the latter coinciding with his book and covering similar ground). Further examples are Richard Price's *An imperial war and the British working class* (1972) and Raphael Samuel's three-volume collection on *Patriotism*, from 1989, whose contributions are not duly recognized.

The empire strikes back? is a richly varied survey, whose chapters take the form of interlinked essays on ways in which the context of empire made itself felt in the lives of different classes, in gender discourse, and in the socialization of the young. Other essays examine the influence of imperialism on domestic politics and trade unionism, its significance for 'Metropolitan Economics', and its impact on notions of British identity. Thompson gets through a lot of material and organizes it well by focusing his presentation on selected case comparisons, which allows him to go into detail and to make his account attractive for the readership of students, to whom it is primarily addressed.

Thompson is keen to make his narrative balanced, but his attempt at even-handedness makes his conclusions rather vacuous. When discussing the impact of imperialism on British politics, he observes that 'in the fashioning of a more democratic political culture, the empire arguably proved as much of a friend as a foe' (p. 154). And when it comes to the importance of the empire for the 'metropolitan' economy, 'the empire's economic impact was not "entirely negligible", neither was it decisive' (p. 178). Overall, '[t]he empire ... was a significant factor in the lives of the British people. It was not, however, all-pervasive' (p. 241). Thus – like Bernard Porter in *The absent-minded imperialists* – Thompson is certainly more on the playing-down than on the exaggerating side.

'Impact' is a difficult concept to work with, and the question is in what sense it can be quantified and measured in the manner Thompson's book implies. He mentions racism and notions of chauvinistic superiority as elements of British identity that may have been influenced by imperialism, but qualifies this by pointing out that 'national superiority' has been directed not only against colonial subject races, but also against Jews, French, Italians, and Portuguese (p. 186). Thompson also seems to argue against the

prevalence of a 'colonialist mentality' in Britain by stating that 'half of the population of Britain is largely or totally ignorant of its imperial history' (p. 224). But surely mentalities, outlooks and social psychologies can be impacted upon by trajectories of the past of which they are not fully aware, and impacts and legacies be of a more subtle and qualitative nature?

The empire strikes back? deals with a few instances of views from the other side – those of colonial subjects of their masters. It has a good section on Gandhi's visit to the Lancashire cotton mills in 1931 and his dialogue with workers and trade unionists. It also mentions a Swazi delegation that came to London in 1894 'to ask Queen Victoria for protection against the Transvaal' (p. 187), and whose members were impressed by 'the tolerant attitudes' of the English at home as compared with those of white settlers in southern Africa (p. 190). But it has nothing, for example, on Indian nationalists like Subhas Chandra Bose, who viewed British colonial rule as worse than fascism, and the Bengal famine of 1943 as a crime overshadowing the Holocaust. And nothing either on the endless number of other delegations to London from Africa – like the Zulu King Cetshwayo's in 1882 – who got nothing but a snub and continued dispossession out of their attempts at dialogue with the empire.

It is the main weakness of the book that it focuses so exclusively on Britain. If nothing else, postcolonial studies have at least succeeded in pointing out the parochial nature of such a perspective – imperial voices and representations do not make sense (and cannot be understood as part of global history) unless we also listen to the responses and counter-offensives they were met with. Europe has been – in Dipesh Chakrabarty's phrase – too far 'provincialized' for it to continue to be treated simply as the centre, and accounted for exclusively in its own terms.

Atlas of slavery

By James Walvin. Harlow: Pearson Education Limited, 2006. Pp. xiv + 146. £19.99.
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Over the last decades James Walvin has proven to be one of those rare historians capable of bringing

scholarly knowledge about American slavery from the academic into the public domain. As demonstrated in numerous publications, Walvin knows how to make complex issues comprehensible to non-specialist audiences in a fluent and entertaining style. In this short atlas, Walvin again exhibits the literary skills that his readers have grown familiar with.

The title suggests an overview of slavery throughout human history, but the atlas focuses on slavery in the Americas and its wider Atlantic context. Walvin defends this limitation by arguing that American slavery was in two ways quite distinct from earlier and later forms of slavery. First, although most slave systems in world history depended on the enslavement of distant peoples and their movement from one region to another, the slave trade from Africa to the Americas took place on an unprecedented scale. During a period of roughly three centuries it connected the social, economic and political lives of people on three different continents. Second, slavery in the Americas, and the transatlantic slave trade that fed it, was sharply defined by race. In the Atlantic world slaves were almost exclusively of black African descent. Following the work of David Eltis, Walvin points out that Europeans in want of labour for their American settlements turned to African slaves, rather than some other form of coerced labour. At the time the Atlantic slave trade started, Europeans were restricting slavery at home; Africans were nonetheless still eligible for enslavement. Europeans preferred to transport African slaves to the Americas and not draw on European forced labour or develop a plantation complex in Africa, Walvin contends, because a system based on African slavery simply worked. Slavery had been practised in Africa for centuries, so Europeans were merely tapping into existing slave supply networks. Doing so did not interfere with contemporary notions of freedom, and developing a plantation economy in Africa was neither ecologically nor politically feasible.

The book's chapters, twenty in total plus an introduction, are all very short. Eighty-seven maps, mostly copied or adapted from existing publications, are spread throughout the text to help convey an 'historical geography of slavery' (p. xiii). The narrative is largely chronological. First the reader is introduced to slavery in the ancient world, the pre-Atlantic African slave trade and slavery in Europe. Next is a block of fourteen chapters devoted to American slavery from its rise in the sixteenth to its fall in the nineteenth century. After an overview of early Portuguese expansion in the Atlantic, Walvin discusses the participation of