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REVIEW ARTICLES

AN EMPIRE OF PRINT

Atlantic families: lives and letters in the later eighteenth century. By Sarah M. S. Pearsall. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008. Pp. xiv+294. ISBN 978-0-19-953299-5. £58.00.

Rakes, highwaymen, and pirates: the making of the modern gentleman in the eighteenth century. By Erin Mackie. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2009. Pp. xii+231. ISBN 978-0-8018-9088-8. £28.50.

A polite exchange of bullets: the duel and the English gentleman, 1750–1850. By Stephen Banks. Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 2010. Pp. iv+317. ISBN 978-1-84383-571-4. £60.00.

The inordinately strange life of Dyce Sombre, Victorian Anglo-Indian MP and Chancery 'lunatic'. By Michael H. Fisher. London: Hurst & Co., 2010. Pp. xx+396. ISBN 978-1849040006. £18.99.

Nabobs: empire and identity in eighteenth-century Britain. By Tillman W. Nechtman. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010. Pp. xiv+266. ISBN 978-0-521-76353-0. £60.00.

Books and the British army in the age of the American Revolution. By Ira D. Gruber. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, copublished with the Society of the Cincinnati, 2010. Pp. xvi+325. ISBN 978-0-8078-3378-0. £47.95.

The last two decades have seen a great upsurge of scholarly interest in the history of Britain and the British empire in the long eighteenth century. This has been provoked in part by Linda Colley's influential thesis that a new British national identity was forged in the years between the Act of Union of 1707 and the accession of Queen Victoria in 1837.[1] Colley's intervention was founded on the concept of 'othering' – she suggested that Britons defined themselves by a series of binary oppositions, first in a succession of increasingly global wars against Catholic France and then, after the final defeat of Napoleon in 1815, against the 'others' presented by Britain's imperial expansion from North America into Africa, Asia, and the Pacific. In the two decades since her work first appeared, Colley's thesis has been challenged and stretched in various ways – not least by those scholars who insist that nascent forms

[1] Linda Colley, *Britons: forging the nation, 1707–1837* (London, 1992).

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of Britishness only remained stable when divergent identities relating to race, ethnicity, religion, class, and gender were obscured.[2] In particular, scholars working towards what has become known as 'the new imperial history', notably Kathleen Wilson, have focused on the ways in which the emergence of empire complicated British identity, emphasizing the reciprocal influences of empire and culture, and uncovering the various ways in which subaltern people and imperial materiality shaped British power and self-identity, both at home and abroad.[3] Such scholars reject the monolithic view of Britishness advanced by Colley, preferring instead to recover the individualized and personal meanings of empire and recognizing that 'the assumption of colonial power marks the emergence of a much more precarious sense of self'.[4]

At stake in much of this scholarship is the much-criticized concept of 'identity', and the various means by which self-understanding is shaped.[5] In the first place, national identity is no longer considered the 'trump identity' that it once was – the one facet of individual selfhood for which people would be willing to sacrifice everything else.[6] Instead, there is now an increasing recognition that other group or individualized identities might complement or even substitute for the 'national' – not least political, social, or religious allegiances, or indeed social locations relating to legal status, gender, skin colour, family connection, reputation, sexuality, conduct, and geography. Moreover, scholars have suggested that 'othering' is not the only or necessarily most important mechanism of identity formation, insisting instead that 'social relations, or identities, were multiple and contingent, bound to a historical social order and both concretized and challenged through the practices of everyday

[2] See, for example, Tony Claydon and Ian McBride, eds., *Protestantism and national identity: Britain and Ireland, c. 1650 – c. 1850* (Cambridge, 1998); Robin Eagles, *Francophilia in English society, 1748–1815* (Basingstoke, 2000); Colin Kidd, *Subverting Scotland's past: Scottish Whig historians and the creation of an Anglo-British identity, 1689 – c. 1830* (Cambridge, 1993); idem, *British identities before nationalism: ethnicity and nationhood in the Atlantic world, 1600–1800* (Cambridge, 1999); Kathleen Wilson, *The sense of the people: politics, culture and imperialism in England, 1715–1785* (Cambridge, 1995); idem, *The island race: Englishness, empire and gender in the eighteenth century* (London, 2003).

[3] Kathleen Wilson, ed., *A new imperial history: culture, identity and modernity in Britain and the empire, 1660–1840* (Cambridge, 2004); see also Martin Daunton and Rick Halpern, eds., *Empire and others: British encounters with indigenous peoples, 1600–1850* (Philadelphia, PA, 1999); Catherine Hall, ed., *Cultures of empire: colonizers in Britain and the Empire in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries* (Manchester, 2000); Stephen Howe, ed., *New imperial histories reader* (London, 2009).

[4] Kate Teltscher, *India inscribed: European and British writing on India, 1600–1800* (Oxford, 1995), p. 7.

[5] Rogers Brubaker and Frederick Cooper, 'Beyond "identity"', *Theory and Society*, 29 (2000), pp. 1–47.

[6] Peter Mandler, 'What is "national identity"? Definitions and applications in modern British historiography', *Modern Intellectual History*, 3 (2006), pp. 271–97 (p. 272).

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life'.[7] Scholars are now much more alert to the performance of identity, drawing the distinction between the largely unknowable process of 'self-fashioning' that goes on internally and the public presentation of particular values, allegiances, and social identifiers.[8] Against this conceptual backdrop, Dror Wahrman's intervention has been particularly influential. Wahrman historicizes the concept of selfhood, arguing that the American Revolution (the very moment, notably, in which eighteenth-century Britons experienced 'the most traumatic national crisis of their lives')[9] heralded an epochal interiorization of personal identity that made the process of self-fashioning more flexible, contingent, and unpredictable, but that simultaneously made the public performance of selfhood more rigid and potentially more intolerant, transgressive and contested. Most importantly for the books under review here, Wahrman suggests that the 'making of the modern self' was contingent on the 'diffuse and ambiguous movement across a whole culture of understandings of identity and self'. It is the 'resonance' of these ideas – by which Wahrman means their diffusion, transmission, reproduction, rejection, or mutation – that he pursues through the variegated detritus of late eighteenth-century print culture, looking for signs of the adoption, adaptation, and contestation of those new concepts of identity with which he is concerned.[10] The 'new imperial history' has also come to concern itself essentially with the circulation of ideas in print, grappling with the dissemination and reception of discourses of empire in a bewildering variety of textual genres – from captive narratives and travel writing, to sermons, plays, and novels.[11] Although some do so more explicitly than others, the six books under review here engage with this set of problems in new and thought-provoking ways, in the process reflecting the sheer breadth and vibrancy of this developing field. They emerge from different disciplinary traditions, deal with different phases of imperial expansion, and rely on radically different sources and approaches, but they all engage in some way with prevailing assumptions about identity and self-fashioning in eighteenth-century

[7] Wilson, ed., *New imperial history*, p. 6.

[8] For the term 'self-fashioning', see Stephen Greenblatt, *Renaissance self-fashioning: from More to Shakespeare* (Chicago, IL. 1980).

[9] Dror Wahrman, 'The English problem of identity in the American Revolution', *American Historical Review*, 106 (2001), par.3 <http://www.historycooperative.org/journals/ahr/106.4/ah0401001236.html> (23 July 2011).

[10] Dror Wahrman, *The making of the modern self: identity and culture in eighteenth-century England* (New Haven, CT, 2004), p. xv.

[11] See, for instance, Wilson, *Sense of the people*; Teltscher, *India inscribed*; Linda Colley, *Captives: Britain, empire, and the world, 1600–1850* (London, 2002); Jill Lepore, *The name of war: King Philip's war and the origins of American identity* (New York, NY, 1998); Felicity Nussbaum, *Torrid zones: maternity, sexuality and empire in eighteenth-century English narrative* (Baltimore, MD, 1995); Margaret Hunt, 'Racism, imperialism and the traveller's gaze in eighteenth-century England', *Journal of British Studies*, 32 (1993), pp. 333–57; Deborah A. Logan, *Harriet Martineau, Victorian imperialism, and the civilising mission* (Farnham, 2010).

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Britain – sharing in common an interest in the dissemination in print of new ideas about Britain and empire.

I

Atlantic families: lives and letters in the later eighteenth century deals with the realities of imperial life for those countless British families who were physically torn apart by the distance involved in empire. In the many hundreds of letters sent between family members separated by the Atlantic Ocean, Sarah Pearsall has mined an intensely personal resource to understand how families overcame the physical and emotional dislocation imposed by the emergence of Britain's 'first empire'. Empire fundamentally challenged contemporary concepts of the 'family', which were rooted in the traditional notion of the 'household' and assumed that a family unit by definition lived under one roof. Pearsall argues that letters stepped into the void created by the imperial absences of family members, allowing the bonds of family feeling and affection to be maintained imaginatively across the oceans even while the physical reality of family life had been cruelly interrupted.

Part I considers the form of eighteenth-century Atlantic letters, focusing on three key cultural values through which Britons at home and abroad sought to retain familial ties with their nearest and dearest – familiarity, sensibility, and credit. Most pragmatically, familial letters propagated 'epistolary values of credit', 'informed by the need to balance epistolary accounts and to be "in credit" in terms of letters' (pp. 113, 128). This was not simply a domestic imperative – rooted in the widespread fear that boys abroad would imperil the reputation and credit-worthiness of their families – it was also a political one, since 'a nation's credit depended on the accumulated credit of its households and its members, and ruin terrified politicians as much as it did fathers' (p. 113). If the need to cultivate credit-worthiness, self-discipline, and respectability often led to harsh words passing between scolding fathers and their irresponsible sons, Atlantic letters also adopted softer means of persuasion. Inspired by a surge of epistolary novels, celebrity correspondences, and letter-writing manuals, eighteenth-century families developed a 'familiar style' in letter writing that departed from the epistolary conventions of deference and devotion that characterized earlier generations. Letters came to embody 'lines' of family feeling that overcame the pain of physical separation, so that correspondents might imagine their loved one sitting alongside them 'by the fire-side' rather than languishing many thousands of miles apart. By privileging ease, affability, and informality, the 'familiar style' also served to welcome outsiders into the figurative family fold, allowing concerned mothers and fathers to trust their itinerant progeny to 'familiar' friends, acquaintances, and business associates on the other side of the globe. The language of the heart then reinforced such bonds of familiarity, Pearsall suggests, 'serving as a fantasy for these men and women, in the face of an Atlantic economy, and a political

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world, in which indifference and even cruelty could be paramount' (pp. 86–7). Sensibility had more political consequences, however, since 'all kinds of people could display sensibility, irrespective of class, gender, age or even race' (p. 94). Sensibility and familiarity empowered women to renegotiate hierarchies within even the most dislocated imperial families, while many slaves appropriated the language of the heart to undermine the very institution that enslaved them, appealing to the sympathetic instincts of feeling masters to win their freedom. Thus the feeling family, which cultivated the cultural priorities at stake here, emerges from Pearsall's account in its own right as an agent 'in instigating, nurturing and maintaining political changes in broader realms' (p. 87).

Pearsall goes to unusual lengths to explain how her three key values were learned, assimilated, and enacted by eighteenth-century letter writers, gathering together considerable evidence for the wide readership of the letter-writing manuals upon which the new 'familiar style' was based, and tracing how the language of feeling entered the minds and hearts of her letter writers from the pages of bestselling novels and conduct books. Sensibility, it seems, was actively disseminated amongst eighteenth-century families, who recommended books like Henry Mackenzie's *Man of feeling* to their absent kin, or paraphrased *Pamela* and *Evelina* in their own sentimental correspondence.[12] Most compellingly of all, Pearsall subjects three 'Atlantic families in crisis' (p. 145) to close analysis, revealing how they defied and overturned the conventional outcomes of stereotypical situations (the penitent son, the husband heading to war, and the cuckolded old husband) by appealing to epistolary credit, sensibility, and family feeling in justifying their demands on one another. Pearsall is thereby able to demonstrate – with an unusual degree of success – the impact of ideas and the practices they prescribed, allowing her to conclude that 'cultural and social ideals created the scripts that gave meaning to individual actions, that provided justification for personal decisions, and that ameliorated the anxieties provoked by dramatic events' (p. 147).

II

If *Atlantic families* documents in extensive and often tender detail the familial values that underpinned Britain's relationship with her imperial world, *Rakes, highwaymen, and pirates: the making of the modern gentleman in the eighteenth century* deals much more theoretically with the range of masculine identities that were available to eighteenth-century Britons. Readers hoping to find a thrilling account of imperial criminality will be sorely disappointed: Erin Mackie makes clear from the outset that this is not a book about rakes, highwaymen, and pirates, but a study of their representation in selected literary texts. At stake,

[12] For an earlier discussion of epistolary uses of *Pamela* in the Atlantic context, see Ned C. Landsman, *From colonials to provincials: American thought and culture, 1680–1760* (New York, NY, 1997), especially pp. 134–9.

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once again, is the notion of sensibility, although here the language of the heart plays a structural role in reprieving the eighteenth-century gentleman from his more sinister alter-egos. Mackie argues that the figure of the gentleman is inherently paradoxical, sharing key personal traits – and a common heritage – with three notorious criminal types of the eighteenth century. The gentleman, like the three illicit gentleman criminals who provide the main focus of discussion, owes his origin to the crisis 'in patriarchal power, honour, virtue, manners and gendered subjectivity' (p. 1) that emerged from the British Civil Wars, the Restoration and the Revolutionary Settlement of 1689. While the three illicit forms of masculinity were sustained well into the nineteenth century by popular nostalgia for 'a type of personal sovereignty operating above the law' (p. 12), sensibility allows the polite gentleman to rise above the prestige of absolute masculine patriarchy. Thus the modern gentleman is 'made' in the collision between eighteenth-century criminal biographies on the one hand and conduct literature and sentimental novels on the other, notably *Sir Charles Grandison*, whose 'contemporary appeal ... lie[s] in his resolution of a specifically eighteenth-century conundrum – how to square ethical virtue with socio-cultural prestige' (p. 171).

Implicit in Mackie's approach is that the texts under discussion – and the range of potential identities they offered to their original readers – mattered, but she seems at least as concerned to point out the continuing echoes of Stuart-style unlimited patriarchy in modern popular culture. *Sir Charles Grandison* has persistently failed to interest 'the secular and irredeemably sceptical critics' of the twentieth century (p. 171), she suggests, precisely because the image of the gentleman Richardson prescribes is so deeply rooted in eighteenth-century moral discourse. Mackie hopes instead to 'facilitate a better understanding of how culture works in the historical relations between early and late modernity' (p. 26), taking in rude boys, Rastafarians and (predictably) Walt Disney's *Pirates of the Caribbean* movie franchise along the way, but she presents no evidence to substantiate her conceptual leap from eighteenth-century gentleman criminals to the modern colloquialism that 'boys will be boys'. If such modern comparators appeal to pure instinct rather than sustained discourse analysis, the lack of historical contextualization is a more fundamental problem when we reflect on the social impact of the texts she deploys – how far they were disseminated, and how the cultural tropes they are supposed to have popularized worked on contemporary readers. Questions of reception and reader response are constantly on the fringes of this study, often implied by the text but rarely tackled head on by its author. In one sustained exception, she follows James Boswell through his *London Journal* as he tries out 'a series of available characters ... to determine both how they fit and how they fit in with his ambitions' (p. 84). Mackie finds at the heart of Boswell's self-fashioning episode in the capital an internal tug-of-war between 'the rakish highwayman, Macheath, and the arbiter of taste and architect of the autonomous realm of the imagination, Mr Spectator' (pp. 84–5), but the reader might well ask how far

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the tortured confessions of one of the century's most obviously manufactured literary personalities can stand in for the reading experiences of his age.

III

Since it 'silently declares one's absolute allegiance to a cultural code impervious to judicial control' (p. 18), Mackie contends that the duel most clearly betrays the gentleman's common heritage with gentleman criminality. Our next book, *A polite exchange of bullets: the duel and the English gentleman, 1750–1850*, reads eighteenth- and nineteenth-century British history through the evolving cultural practice of duelling, arguing that it 'ordered the relations of gentlemen with each other and conditioned the way in which they perceived and were perceived by the rest of society' (p. 2). Building sensitively on the earlier efforts of Donna T. Andrew, Brian Manning, and others, Stephen Banks traces the origins of duelling not to the Stuart crisis in masculine authority but to the Italian Renaissance, carried to England and other parts of northern Europe by itinerant merchants, mercenaries, and aristocrats, and in the pages of humanistic courtesy literature such as Castiglione's *Courtier* (first translated into English in 1561).[13] Print is once again a crucial vehicle for the dissemination of ideas about personal conduct and social location, with homegrown works such as Simon Robson's *The courte of civill courtesie* (1577) and William Segar's *Honor military and civill* (1602) installing the practice of duelling in the Elizabethan and Jacobean courts, and numerous books and pamphlets helping to codify, popularize, and then disparage the practice as the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries progressed.

Banks presents a forensic survey of the incidence and distribution of duelling, both socially and geographically, detailing the countervailing obligations that forced gentlemen to risk all to protect their honour. Duelling emerges as an urban phenomenon, with its natural home amongst those for whom honour was most eagerly contested (the armed services) or aspired to (those on the lower rungs of the new professions of law and medicine), but not particularly rife amongst country gentlemen, whose standing rested as much on centuries-old land as it did on honour. In fact, one of the more interesting suggestions to emerge from this book is that the actual incidence of duelling (which is notoriously difficult to compute from partial newspaper reportage) did not necessarily reflect its socio-cultural importance – as Banks suggests, 'it is entirely possible for individuals to define themselves by potential powers that are rarely activated, by reference to acts that are, in fact, rarely performed' (p. 67).

[13] Donna T. Andrew, 'The code of honour and its critics: the opposition to duelling in England, 1700–1850', *Social History*, 5 (1980), pp. 409–34; V. G. Kiernan, *The duel in European history: honour and the reign of the aristocracy* (Oxford, 1988); Robert B. Shoemaker, 'The taming of the duel: masculinity, honour and ritual violence in London, 1660–1800', *Historical Journal*, 45 (2002), pp. 525–45; Roger B. Manning, *Swordsmen: the martial ethos in the three kingdoms* (Oxford, 2003).

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Duelling was also a practice that had very real implications for empire, being particularly entrenched within those very groups of gentlemen who were most likely to participate in Britain's global expansion. Honour culture was intensified by the claustrophobic social lives of those serving abroad, so that duelling became both a jealously guarded emblem of imperial prestige and a constant threat to stable and effective administration. The catalogue of imperial commanders who fell victim to duels is one of the more stunning revelations of this book, and such disputes were all the more perilous because they moved so freely across the imperial world – 'a Canadian barrister became a judge in Sierra Leone; a quarrel between Indian administrators resulted in a duel in London; a dispute at Portsmouth was played out before the garrison at Gibraltar' (p. 95).

Although successive governments turned a blind eye to the paralysing effects of personal conflicts that were essentially illegal, Britain's imperial mission did seemingly contribute to the decline of duelling in the middle decades of the nineteenth century. It was 'only by bureaucratising colonial administration' that Britain's presence overseas could be 'secured and exploited' (p. 237), argues Banks, who points to the professionalization of the military as one of many reasons for the decline of honour culture – although here Banks might perhaps overplay his hand, since serious reform of the army took root only after duelling had reached its nadir. Moral pressure exerted in the public sphere also played its part – not least the increasing torrent of satirical caricatures that figured the duellist as 'vain, silly and ludicrous creatures, often cowardly, often fraudulent' (p. 215) – but Banks puts greater emphasis on change from within. New concepts of status and reputation displaced traditional notions of gentlemanly prestige, privileging hard work and sound, long-term planning that could no longer be sacrificed to the momentary dictates of honour. There were changes within the system of duelling itself, with new modes of duelling emerging which placed less emphasis on the absolute nature of the contest, and for those gentlemen who were reluctant to indulge the culture of honour even in its reformed 'moral' guise, the courts offered an attractive alternative. Indeed, although previous accounts have stressed the long-term impotence of the law, Banks (primarily a legal historian) recovers the increasingly effective role played by courts as a deterrent against duelling in high society – including the criminal misdemeanour of issuing a challenge, and the equalizing power of Victorian prison reforms. With criminal informations regularly being laid against those who had issued a challenge, the image-obsessed duellist was faced with the stark reality that by defending his honour in the traditional manner, he would risk bringing down on his reputation the degradation and utter dishonour of imprisonment alongside the common criminal.

IV

In *The inordinately strange life of Dyce Sombre, Victorian Anglo-Indian MP and Chancery 'lunatic'*, the subaltern protagonist's fundamental misreading of the

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social prestige of duelling in early Victorian Britain exposes his desperate but haphazard attitude towards self-fashioning. Having immersed himself in romanticized fictional accounts of polite duelling on his passage from India, Sombre attempted to combat his culture shock on arriving in London by constructing an image of himself as the consummate British gentleman. He duly issued a series of challenges to defend his honour and that of his newly acquired English wife, but did so precisely at the time when duelling was entering its terminal decline. Not only did he so thoroughly mistime his recourse to this increasingly outdated element of genteel identity, but he also flouted the carefully constructed code of conduct that had been built into the system of duelling, inundating high society with an unseemly plethora of challenges that he never once backed up with honourable action. When he then flouted the gendered conventions of duelling by exhorting his wife to challenge other aristocratic women to duel over his honour, polite society concluded that he was quite mad, and his wife had him detained as a 'Chancery Lunatic', effectively placing his person and his vast personal wealth in the hands of his wife and her family. Even then, Sombre's quest to be accepted as a member of the British elite was not at an end; after a daring escape from Liverpool's Adelphi Hotel, he paraded around Europe and North Africa for the next decade collecting evidence wherever he went that he was not, in fact, mad – with the question of his sanity coming to revolve around his peculiarly entangled sense of personal identity. Those that judged his behaviour by British standards considered him insane; those who judged him by the standards of his Oriental upbringing considered him to have acted consistently with the cultural norms of South Asia. Complex debates about the relationship between empire, culture, religion, gender, race, ethnicity, and mental health thereby came to be played out in a sequence of appeals that kept Dyce Sombre's story on the front pages of newspapers across the English-speaking world.

Written in an engagingly novelistic style, this gripping biography will appeal to a wider general audience, but succeeds at the same time in asking a series of searching questions about the nature of empire and its impact on the lives, motivations, and values of those bound up in British imperial expansion. Michael Fisher is on familiar ground here, building on his earlier groundbreaking account of the influx of Indians into the colonial West.[14] *The inordinately strange life of Dyce Sombre* develops similar themes, taking as its engrossing subject one of the most complex characters of the imperial age. Tracing his descent from German and French Catholic mercenaries, a Scots Presbyterian East India Company (EIC) officer, and their Muslim and Hindu lovers, Dyce Sombre was raised in the cosmopolitan court of Sardhana, 'poised geographically, politically and culturally between the wilting Mughal and burgeoning British empires' (p. 3). As the adoptive heir of the notoriously despotic Begum Sombre, his own

[14] Michael Fisher, *Counterflows to colonialism: Indian travellers and settlers in Britain, 1600–1857* (Delhi, 2004).

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life was framed by her 'cultural ambidexterity' (p. 27), reflected in his fusion of Indian, European, and Anglo-Indian attitudes towards clothing, deportment, language, religion, politics, architecture, personal hygiene, and sexuality, and by her fabulous wealth – which became the subject of a series of protracted legal disputes between Dyce Sombre and the EIC after the Begum's death. He carried these controversial associations into exile, becoming increasingly disoriented as his deeply ingrained notions of social prestige and carefully manicured Anglo-Indian ethnicity came to mean progressively less to those he encountered along the way – with his clumsy attempts to refashion his identity proving particularly ineffective, as we have already seen.

If the story of Dyce Sombre has much to tell us about the constructed, performative, and contingent nature of legal, medical, social, and cultural identities in the past, it also has serious implications for our understanding of the relationship between Britain and its empire. The character of Sombre himself makes clear that the cultural exchanges facilitated by imperial expansion were always multi-dimensional, but Fisher uses Sombre's life to push this argument much further. He contends, for instance, that the growing maturity of the colonial (and ex-colonial) public sphere contributed to the evolving concepts of race and ethnicity that frustrated Sombre's attempts to belong, with the hostile attitudes to aspiring Indians promulgated by newspapers in Australia, New Zealand, and North America 'seeping back from the colonies into English society' (p. 191). Indeed, Fisher is particularly strong in explaining how print was used both by imperial Britons in disseminating attitudes towards the empire and its inhabitants, and by the colonized in negotiating their own relationship with Britain. More conventional is Fisher's emphasis on the long-standing British fear of Asian luxury and despotism, which figured prominently when contemporaries attempted to come to terms with Dyce Sombre's interventions in British society – whether it be his removal as an MP for sharp electoral practices dangerously reminiscent of Indian despotism (not to mention papist corruption), or his unseemly matrimonial problems, which provided conservative moral commentators all the proof they needed that the British ruling class had been undermined by the luxurious wealth of her eastern colonies. Fisher refuses to have the final word in such debates, however, standing back sensitively from his material to allow the overbearing character of Dyce Sombre himself to dominate the narrative. The result is a deeply stimulating account of the culture shock provoked by empire, and Fisher is to be congratulated for bringing so complex – and richly documented – a figure to recent discussions about the history of the British empire.

V

Nabobs: empire and identity in eighteenth-century Britain takes us back to the moment when many of the cultural prejudices provoked by Dyce Sombre were forged.

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Tillman Nechtman argues not only that late eighteenth-century Britons acknowledged the challenges posed by empire to nascent notions of national identity, but that many actively sought to reject imperial influences in the everyday patterns of domestic life. Thus the experience of empire created two types of Briton, the domestic Britons and the imperial Britons (popularly known as nabobs, or as Nechtman calls them, 'empire's hobgoblins' (p. 15)), with the social, cultural, and political frictions between the two reaching their apogee in the impeachment of Warren Hastings. Burke's proceedings against Hastings were not just about exposing the corruption of the EIC's management of British India; rather, Burke had in mind a much broader ideological agenda to expose the corrosive influence of empire on British values, symbolized by the material plunder associated with imperial overreach. 'The question of eastern plunder was fraught', contends Nechtman, 'because it suggested that Britons might be susceptible to India's corrupting environment' (p. 103), and Burke attempted to reach the broadest possible audience by putting imperial materiality on trial on the most public stage available.

All of this will, most probably, be readily familiar, and nabobs have attracted considerable scholarly attention in the past; what is new here is the emphasis on material culture and the public sphere. Nechtman skilfully outlines the extent to which Burke actually lost control of his message, with press coverage of the impeachment proceedings whipping up an atmosphere of near hysteria against the figure of the nabob and the broader imperial project. Nechtman ties this to the incursion into the domestic market of material manifestations of empire, including ostentatious diamonds and jewels, exotic furnishings and fashions, Indian culinary tastes, unfamiliar hygienic practices such as shampooing, Eastern architectural styles, and even wild animals such as tigers and elephants. Whereas imperial Britons tended to value such items and practices as emblems of their global identities, for domestic Britons they exhibited the tangible impact of empire and all its unsettling connotations. Imperial materiality seemed to reverse the process of empire-building, with nabobs building Indian settlements within the British Isles and refusing to domesticate themselves by adhering to British values. This was all the more disturbing because it often seemed to be women who were driving the consumption of imperial goods – although Nechtman points out that the frequency of media attacks on imperial women was entirely disproportionate to the actual number of women who spent any time in British India.

While Nechtman presents an extremely rich and nuanced account of the myriad ways by which Indian practices and goods colonized Britain in the eighteenth century – and of how these processes were reported in the newspaper press – he is somewhat less convincing on the rhetorical and ideological debates that underpinned the fear of Eastern luxury. A succession of travel narratives mapped India onto the stadial plan of history advanced by the Enlightenment, Nechtman suggests, by which the natural wealth and propitious environment of the subcontinent had stunted the development of Indian

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society and doomed her people to laziness, immorality, opulence, luxury, and despotism. Domestic Britons feared Indian ingression into the domestic market because it was thought to threaten Britain's unrivalled place at the apex of human society – thus imperial Britons who 'opined for India in material ways... suggested an imperial peril rooted in contamination and degeneration' (p. 64). Although this conclusion would seem to be broadly true, Nechtman's knowledge of the Enlightenment texts upon which such an analysis might have been founded is surprisingly woolly, classifying philosophers Thomas Reid and Francis Hutcheson (misspelled 'Hutchinson' here) as 'historians of the Scottish Enlightenment' alongside the likes of David Hume and Adam Ferguson (p. 26), and citing generalist textbooks on the subject without displaying particular familiarity with the texts themselves.[15] More broadly, it is not entirely obvious precisely how influential such texts were in feeding the nabob controversy or the age-old debate about luxury. The corrupting power of empire was, for instance, an explicit concern of national historians such as Robert Watson, in his studies of Spanish imperial overreach in the sixteenth century,[16] or, still more pertinently, Edward Gibbon. Indeed, the spectre of Rome is entirely absent from this book, despite the contemporary commonplace that the Roman empire had been brought to its knees by Eastern luxury – not to mention the uncomfortable fact that Gibbon's masterful *Decline and Fall* was far more widely read in the late eighteenth century than the more technical conjectural historians of the Enlightenment.[17]

The fate of imperial Rome – and of those other historical empires on which eighteenth-century historians so often wrote – is particularly important because it provided a range of imperial *exempla* that many writers thought might help Britain avoid the perennial dangers of empire.[18] In this sense, Gibbon's *Decline and fall* might have warranted a mention in Nechtman's half-hearted explanation of why the nabob controversy dissipated so quickly, along with the many other historical and quasi-historical works that sought to piggy-back on Gibbon's commercial success. In this, the weakest part of Nechtman's book, we might also have expected a more thorough consideration of the imperial *longue durée* in which the nabob controversy erupted, since the economic and cultural depression that followed the loss of America and the anti-French,

[15] Authoritative studies of the conjectural history of the Scottish Enlightenment include Christopher J. Berry, *The social theory of the Scottish Enlightenment* (Edinburgh, 1997); Gladys Bryson, *Man and society: the Scottish inquiry of the eighteenth century* (Princeton, NJ, 1945); David Spadafora, *The idea of progress in eighteenth-century Britain* (London, 1990).

[16] David Allan, 'Anti-Hispanicism and the construction of late eighteenth-century British patriotism: Robert Watson's *History of the reign of Philip the Second*', *Bulletin of Hispanic Studies*, 77 (2000), pp. 423–49.

[17] J. G. A. Pocock, *Barbarism and religion* (5 vols. Cambridge, 2000–11).

[18] For influential models of female patriotism taken from classical history, see Karen O'Brien, *Women and enlightenment in eighteenth-century Britain* (Cambridge, 2009).

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anti-revolutionary fervour of the 1790s and early 1800s made Britons think very differently about themselves and their relationship with the wider world.[19]

VI

If *Nabobs* is let down by its imprecise incursion into intellectual history, *Books and the British army in the age of the American Revolution* proposes a more comprehensive survey of the texts that contributed to identity formation amongst one particular group of eighteenth-century Britons. Ira Gruber sets out to tackle a perennial problem in intellectual history – that historians are generally frustrated in their attempts to identify precisely those texts that had the most impact in the past by the methodologies available to them, such as the frequency with which books were reprinted or translated into English, those that attracted the widest range of subscribers, or those that (with the hindsight of modern scholarship) were most effectively put together or most originally argued. Gruber is particularly concerned with the relative importance of books on war for the eighteenth-century British army and its officer corps, proposing that a more comprehensive understanding of the types of books British officers read in the age of the American Revolution might substantially improve our understanding of the theoretical priorities that framed their campaigns. He outlines the preferences of 42 officers, listing the 650 books on war these officers owned, bought, recommended, cited, or wrote about (though crucially in the first great age of library expansion, not those books they might have borrowed),[20] as well as the 243 they seem to have neglected. Gruber acknowledges that his elite corps of officers were 'an exceptional group of men' (p. 10) – wealthier, better connected, and better educated than most of their fellow officers, and occupying a disproportionate share of rank and responsibility in the British army – but he makes a virtue of his non-representative sample by pointing out that these men were best placed to implement new ideas.

Although the main text is devoted to annotated bibliographies of the books preferred and neglected by the chosen few, an introductory chapter situates their bookish tastes amongst the wider trends of eighteenth-century military history. Most importantly, Gruber suggests, this was an age when the professionalization of the art of war started to provide a secure career path for army

[19] Compare, for instance, Christopher A. Bayly, *Imperial meridian: the British empire and the world, 1780–1830* (London, 1989); idem, *Indian society and the making of the British empire* (Cambridge, 1988); Brendan Simms, *Three victories and a defeat: the rise and fall of the first British empire, 1714–1783* (London, 2007).

[20] Paul Kaufman, *Libraries and their users: collected papers in library history* (London, 1969); David Allan, *'A nation of readers': the lending library in Georgian England, c. 1720 – c. 1830* (London, 2008); James Raven, *London booksellers and American customers: transatlantic literary community and the Charleston Library Society, 1748–1811* (Columbia, OH, 2002); Mark Towsey, *Reading the Scottish Enlightenment: books and their readers in provincial Scotland, 1750–1820* (Leiden, 2010).

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officers, giving them 'the opportunity and incentive to become students of warfare and to think of themselves as members both of an emerging British profession and of an international community of soldiers' (p. 23). This was reflected both in the increasing numbers of books that were written by British officers in the decades after 1750, and in the increasingly self-aware bookishness of military leaders such as General James Wolfe and Sir Henry Clinton. The somewhat surprising conclusion to emerge from Gruber's data is that British army officers were most clearly influenced by continental – and especially French – authorities. This had important implications for the way British officers masterminded military campaigns, since French tacticians were notably more conservative than authorities such as Marlborough, Caesar, or Scipio. Gruber contends that the cultural priority of French books on war thereby influenced the outcome of the American crisis: 'The British government was more than willing to take risks to end the American rebellion ... but it was obstructed for more than six years by prevailing French ideas that not only encouraged its commanders in chief to pursue cautious operations but also shielded those commanders from criticism and recall' (p. 52).

If *Books and the British army* shows how the history of the book might be harnessed to address specific questions in British imperial and military history, it is insufficiently aware of recent scholarship in this fertile field to be genuinely ground-breaking.[21] Although each bibliography is carefully prefaced by methodological commentary, some of the unspoken assumptions that underpin Gruber's database limit the usability of what would otherwise have been a very useful exercise indeed. The vast majority of sources he points to record the mere fact of ownership, for example, even though the fact that someone owned a certain book in the past cannot be taken as sure proof that they ever read it, let alone tell us anything about how it influenced their values and behaviour. And notwithstanding Gruber's failure to note the prominence of army officers at the plethora of lending libraries that sprang up across the empire, some of the evidence he does use for officers' preferences would seem scanty in the extreme. He contends that the 'General Officer Lately Deceas'd' whose library was purportedly auctioned off at Covent Garden in June 1773 owned more books on war than any of his contemporaries, without noting booksellers' 'long-standing practice of salting named sales with indistinguishable other stock',[22]

[21] Important contributions include David Allan, *Making British culture: English readers and the Scottish Enlightenment, 1740–1830* (London, 2008); Roger Chartier, *The order of books: readers, authors, and libraries in Europe between the fourteenth and eighteenth centuries*, trans. Lydia G. Cochrane (Cambridge, 1994); Stephen Colclough, *Consuming texts: readers and reading communities, 1695–1870* (Basingstoke, 2007); Robert Darnton, 'First steps toward a history of reading', *Australian Journal of French Studies*, 23 (1986), pp. 5–30; Jan Fergus, *Provincial readers in eighteenth-century England* (Oxford, 2006); James Raven, Helen Small, and Naomi Tadmor, eds., *The practice and representation of reading in England* (Cambridge, 1996).

[22] David McKitterick, 'Book catalogues: their varieties and uses', in Peter Davidson, ed., *The book encompassed: studies in twentieth-century bibliography* (Cambridge, 1992), p. 166.

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while General Sir Thomas Blomefield (1744–1822) is included on the basis of his successful bidding at the same auction, without any evidence for the books that he already owned. Most frustratingly, Gruber seems uninterested in other kinds of books that army officers might have owned, borrowed, or read, leaving us to wonder how far the bestselling texts of the age (the histories of Hume, Robertson, Gibbon, or Voltaire, for instance, or the novels of Richardson, Fielding, and Fanny Burney) influenced their self-fashioning as honourable military men. The more feeling concepts of manhood propagated by the sentimental novels on which Erin Mackie and Sarah Pearsall lavish so much attention would seem to relate closely to the polite concepts of gentlemanly warfare that continued to hold sway until at least the Napoleonic Wars,[23] but this is one element of eighteenth-century military history that Gruber apparently considers unimportant – despite his suggestive indication that Lieutenant Colonel Thomas Coppinger Moyle took novels by Sterne, Fielding, and Mackenzie with him on campaign in North America.

VII

The six books reviewed here reflect how far studies of eighteenth-century Britain and the British empire have deepened and diversified in recent times. Although they take very different routes, they all tend to marginalize the question of national identity (often electing to sidestep debates about 'Britishness' entirely), preferring instead to focus on Britons themselves – the cultural, social, political, and religious identities they chose to take up, and the means by which they negotiated their personal place in British society. At the same time, these books share one key insight of the 'new imperial history', insisting that empire forced Britons – and the people they colonized – to think differently about their lives, constructing new identities to normalize (or combat) the globalization of everyday life. They did so most frequently by reference to print culture, with letters, conduct literature, histories, travel narratives, newspapers, and novels providing the mental tools that allowed individual readers to fashion and refashion themselves amid the bewildering assortment of cultural influences thrown up by imperial engagements. The story these books tell, then, is not about 'othering', but rather about the norms individuals chose to adopt. Eighteenth-century Britons relied on books to teach them how to cope with the distance enforced by empire; they defined and redefined their social standing through cultural codes outlined in print; they used books to shape their attitudes to warfare, career development, and current affairs; they even

[23] Particularly pertinent recent contributions include Judith L. van Buskirk, *Generous enemies: patriots and loyalists in revolutionary New York* (Philadelphia, PA, 2003); Stephen Conway, 'The British army, "Military Europe", and the American War of Independence', *William and Mary Quarterly*, 3rd ser., 68 (2010), pp. 69–100; Sarah Knott, 'Sensibility and the American War for Independence', *American Historical Review*, 109 (2004), pp. 19–40.

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used newspapers and satirical prints to negotiate the colonization of the domestic market by imperial materiality. If we are to appreciate fully how the British understood themselves and the world around them, these books suggest, we need to turn to the books and newspapers that they produced and read – for eighteenth-century Britons lived increasingly in an empire of print.

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