

## Consuming empires in the eighteenth century

*Empire of guns* considers the production, trade, and consumption of guns to prompt new questions about British economic, social, and cultural life. Empire, war, religion, property, finance, manufacturing, and industrial growth have long been central to historical analyses of eighteenth-century British life, but they converge in *Empire of guns* to highlight the importance of the state and the centrality of violence in processes of industrialization. Through its exploration of the circulation of capital, commodities, and knowledge that propelled gun-making, *Empire of guns* underlines the globally interconnected nature of Birmingham's industrial growth and points to new ways of considering the relationship between the regional, national, and global. Such analysis has important impacts on current understandings of consumption and capital, pointing to further avenues for research and new interpretations. More particularly, by placing the state as consumer-in-chief, *Empire of guns* shifts away from the traditional focus of eighteenth-century consumption studies. It widens the lens beyond the capacities, desires, and practices of individual consumers to consider the impacts of state-backed consumption on processes of acquisition, production, and industrial innovation. Alongside tracking the production and consumption of commodities, the book also traces flows of capital through different familial and religious networks to illuminate how finance travelled and sustained the gun-making industry. It highlights how forms of intimacy shaped these networks, and underlines the importance of certain connections and relationships in fostering capital flows. In sum, *Empire of guns* proves an important book which changes understandings of the routes to and impacts of industrial growth in Britain and beyond.

As mentioned, *Empire of guns* shifts away from the usual focus of eighteenth-century studies of consumption, which often examine the practices and wants of individual consumers. Instead Priya Satia places the state in the spotlight and considers its role as consumer-in-chief, a role more commonly accorded to it in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Satia finds that war provides *the* context, shaping the state's actions. *Empire of guns* understands eighteenth-century Britain as a 'military industrial society' and contends that little economic space existed outside the war machine. It does so by recognizing the centrality of war (particularly during the second half of the eighteenth century and the early nineteenth century), but also by identifying the permeable and interlinked nature of the eighteenth-century British economy, in which it was difficult to distinguish between flows of materials, products, and finance for war and non-war efforts. Within such flows, the state played an important role in buying up arms and supplies for war, protecting manufacturing trades through times of peace to allow them to meet supply in times of war, and encouraging innovation through creating a demanding market.

Here, then, production and consumption are brought within the same analytical frame, and war is understood as *the* backdrop, not only to state action, but more broadly to the 'Industrial Revolution', moving us away from recent discussions regarding the importance of energy supplies, slavery, the circulation of useful knowledge, and demographic shifts. While the book makes a compelling case for the importance of war, the particularity of the case (the production and sale of arms in comparison to other commodities, such as cotton, porcelain, and sugar) needs to be questioned by asking how representative the case of gun-making and sales might be and thus what it might tell us about the importance of war within wider processes of industrial development. Moreover, while the state was clearly a crucial consumer of arms in the period, the book also underlines the importance of private trade to African markets as another key means of sustaining the industry in peacetime (a point that Giacomo Macola further explores in his review). Such investigations suggest the need to question the centrality of war and peace and how the processes connected to each informed and developed the other.

Alongside tracking flows of commodities, *Empire of guns* shows the importance of tracing the networks of debt and credit needed to fund the purchase of materials, parts, machinery, and

labour. Despite a shift in focus, war also exists as the most important backdrop to understanding elements of debt and credit. War precipitated the need for government debt, and its sale created a source of funding critical to the sustenance of financial markets and trade. Nevertheless, Satia demonstrates that other contexts and connections were also important in financing the gun trade. As with other regions and industries, wealth in property was vital to facilitating credit. In the West Midlands, land and real estate embedded in the locality acted as important security for debt and credit networks which operated on a national, imperial, and global scale.

The Midlands region, and more particularly Birmingham, was also served by an overlap between gun-making and banking. Country banks often emerged from industrial interests and the networks that they forged, and those banks then went on to serve industrial interests and further their concerns. More generally, networks remained important to the facilitation of funding for industrial enterprises. By exploring the Farmer and Galton families, the book shows that, whether joined by religion, family, or industrial concerns, the circulation of credit and debt continued to rely on personal connections. *Empire of guns* mirrors the work of scholars such as Catherine Hall and Margot Finn in underlining the continued importance of relationships to the movement of finance. In families like the Farmers and Galtons, kinship networks were particularly important in facilitating the circulation of capital and the sustainability of such circulation over generations. Focusing on familial relationships contributes to a key strength within *Empire of guns* – that its central narrative is distinctly peopled – as we follow individuals such as James and Joseph Farmer and Samuel Galton. Nevertheless, certain groups fail to appear with such regularity and as individuals. In the African context, which is critical to the British gun trade, our understanding of the merchants involved, their position, backgrounds, and names remains hazy. Moreover, while *Empire of guns* shows that marriage was crucial to flows of funding, women remain underexplored. The book suggests the need for further research exploring the roles that women played in expanding networks and ensuring their sustainability over time, and provides one means of resituating women within broader histories of capitalism and violence.

Finally, *Empire of guns* distinctly situates the history of the gun trade within Birmingham and underlines the importance of understanding the local and regional contexts in which change took place. While geographically embedded, the history is not geographically restricted. Rather, the history of the gun trade looks out from Birmingham to consider the nature of connections at both a national and an international level. Birmingham firms are shown to have been simultaneously operating within local, national, and international contexts, markets, and networks, in order to obtain the materials, money, and labour needed to meet contracts. *Empire of guns* underlines the need to consider the local in shaping the flows and interconnections of fundamental importance to the global. It also suggests the need to explore the prevalence of specific regional connections to empire and how they shaped experiences and understandings of imperial processes.

In sum, *Empire of guns* brings new perspectives and connections to bear on important aspects of eighteenth-century British life. It connects together processes of production, consumption, and finance, and examines them within the context of local, national, and international connections to produce a more complex picture of the gun trade and industrial development within British imperial sites.

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