

WHAT DID THEY

Bernard Porter argues that, through most of the nineteenth century, most Britons knew little and cared less about the spread of the Empire.

THE IDEA THAT BRITISH SOCIETY was thoroughly infused with 'imperialism' in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries has gained broad currency in recent years. Influential here have been John MacKenzie's works on the wide spread of imperial propaganda in the later part of this period, at least; and the late Edward Said's exposure of the hidden imperial content of much of the 'high' culture of the earlier nineteenth century. Some have taken these findings much further to justify imperialist readings of just about every feature of modern British society before the 1960s. Travel, science, exhibitions, zoos, boys' adventure stories, even nude paintings (Empire as rape), were all essentially imperialist activities. Modern film and TV adaptations of Victorian novels and documentaries about nineteenth and early twentieth-century subjects regularly interpolate imperial references, even when they do not appear in the original texts, on the ground, presumably, that the Victorians must have been thinking about their Empire even when they did not talk or write about it, rather like sex, and that this needs to be brought out for a modern audience. (An example is Sarah Curtis's 1999 film version of Jane Austen's *Mansfield Park* of 1814.) The impression given is that almost everyone was an imperialist of one kind or another. They must have been, seems to be the assumption behind this; the Empire was so vast and great and vital to them. It also must have needed their commitment; otherwise how could it have survived?

Of course the Empire left its marks on British society. This is especially so materially. It provided work for Britons, for example, manufacturing things for colonial markets; or – another way of looking at it – helped keep their wages low. It may also have contributed to Britain's long-term industrial decline, by masking it for so long. It furnished an escape route for the poor and dis-



affected, through emigration, thus possibly defusing civil unrest. It kept the British supplied with much of their ubiquitous tea and sugar (and so helped rot their teeth). It had an input into domestic social reform, the 'woman question', the public schools, and the development of policing in the UK. It puffed up the monarchy. It was responsible for the violent early deaths of many Britons, mostly men, especially if we believe that its existence was partly to blame for the outbreak of the First World War. Latterly, it made a terrific show: celebrations, processions, lots of dressing up in silly clothes. This is quite apart from its repercussions on the wider world it served or tyrannised (according to one's point of view), which is not under discussion here. The Empire's huge impact on Britain is undeniable. So is the fact that it left its footprints in many areas of British culture, including even *Mansfield Park*, though far more lightly in the novel than Sarah Curtis implies on screen. Influence, however, is something else. The Empire could have impacted on Britons without their really noticing it, let

Victoria offers the Bible to an African chief in Thomas Jones Barker's painting 'The Secret of England's Greatness', c.1863.

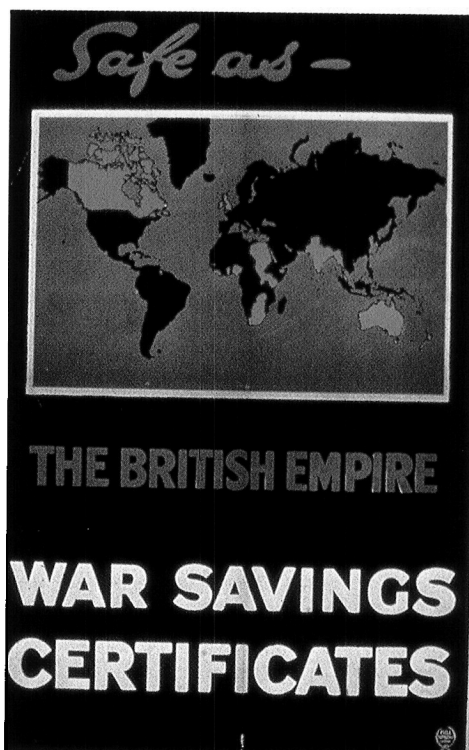
alone enthusing over it. Surprisingly, to a great extent this seems to have been the case.

There are several reasons for thinking this. One is empirical. There are vast areas of British society and culture, especially during the first three-quarters of the nineteenth century, where the most remarkable fact is how relatively bereft of obvious imperial references or allusions they are. This is especially true of 'high' culture; which is why our post-colonial cultural theorists – followers of Said – have to tease them out. Not a single 'canonical' novel of the nineteenth century features the Empire significantly. The same applies to all the other arts. One would have thought that opera composers, at least, would have relished Indian or African settings; but not in Britain's case. There is no empirical evidence to suggest that nudes were meant as metaphors for colonial conquest; that is simply a modern construction placed upon them. If

KNOW OF EMPIRE?

painters yearned for the exotic, they usually found it in the English Middle Ages, not the colonised East. The taste for 'oriental' architecture hardly survived the death of George IV, and very few of London's public buildings were as 'imperial' in other ways – grandiose and Roman, for example – as in many other capital cities of the world, including republican Washington. Imperialists used to complain of this. London was just not worthy of the Empire. In 1904 a couple of patriotic architects mooted a new project to remedy this: an 'Imperial Monumental Halls and Tower', dwarfing the adjacent Houses of Parliament and Westminster Abbey – state and church – symbolically. It was never built, of course. London did not even have many statues of imperialists, and none who were not soldiers as well. More popular forms of culture were equally bereft of imperial content. The people's favourite novels, plays and songs were on other themes entirely; shows of the Empire's 'savage' subjects, though they did exist, were few and far between. Why was this great, apparently overwhelming Empire not celebrated more openly in the literary and artistic culture of the time? France, after all, had no qualms about celebrating hers.

There are special explanations in the case of the 'higher' forms of art.



Serious artists and the *litterati* were atypical of British society as a whole. They regarded themselves as 'above' it, and were likely to avoid topics regarded as 'popular' for that reason alone. Colonies were a particular anathema because they represented rude action rather than refined feeling and thought. Imperialists returned the compliment, being generally unsympathetic to 'art'.

By the 1910s, the Empire – a quarter of the globe shaded red or pink – offered the images of reassurance and security, as in this First World War advertisement for savings certificates.

Men of action regarded art as 'effeminate'. Britain did not need to paint or sculpt or carol her Empire, wrote Thomas Carlyle:

... thy Epic, unsung in words, is written in huge characters on the face of this Planet – sea-moles, cotton-trades, railways, fleets and cities, Indian Empires, Americas, New Hollands: legible throughout the Solar System.

That was more than sufficient. The British were a strong, silent, undemonstrative and practical people. Obviously this did not make them non-imperialists; rather the reverse.

This may help explain the imperial deficit in the 'higher' and more refined forms of culture; but hardly in the cruder, more popular kinds. Why do nineteenth-century boys' adventure stories before G.A. Henty, for example, also avoid the British Empire so deliberately? (A non-colonised 'Coral Island' – as in R.M. Ballantyne's novel of 1858 – was not the same.) Could it be because the lower classes were not particularly interested in it, either?

More evidence for this lack of interest comes from what we know of the education system of the time. The Empire was hardly ever a subject for study in schools. Some scholars have been misled about this by a number of contemporary history (and to a lesser extent geography) school textbooks that did touch on it; but most of those are highly unrepresentative. Fletcher and (Rudyard) Kipling's oft-cited and notoriously imperialistic *A School History of England* (1911), for example, was

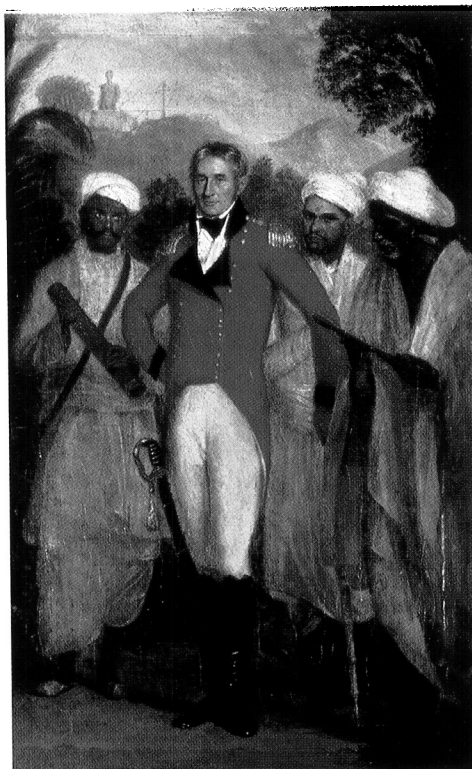
Indian soldiers wounded fighting for the mother country on the Western Front recuperate in the Royal Pavilion Brighton.



widely derided in its own time ('almost too bad to be true' is one of the milder criticisms), and in any case was far too expensive for most schools to buy.

Public schools rarely taught any modern history at all. This was because of their emphasis on the Classics. The only way the upper classes formally learned about the British Empire was indirectly, through the Roman. Elementary schoolchildren did not even get that. History and Geography had no place at all in most state school curricula for most of the nineteenth century, and only a small niche for several years after that. The history that was taught in the 'middling' schools – the ones the textbooks were written for – usually had a different agenda from the 'imperialist' one; its main theme was the growth of individual 'liberty' in Britain, with the Empire – which fitted uneasily with this, of course – pushed to the margins. The idea that Victorian schoolrooms all sported red-bespattered world maps on their walls is also a myth; colour-coding the British Empire in this way only caught on in the 1880s, and the maps did not start appearing widely until the 1900s, when they were donated to the schools by imperial

The Ragged School, West St, by George Cruikshank, where little attempt would have been made to teach about the Empire.



Lording it over the natives: Col. Colin Mackenzie in India, painted by Thomas Hickey in 1816.

common. It is this kind of thing that the historian J.R. Secley was referring to when he wrote in 1883, famously, that the empire seemed to have been acquired 'in a fit of absence of mind'. What he meant was that this was the impression one got from reading the accounts of it in the history books then available; not that it *had* been acquired absent-mindedly. Seeley felt this was all wrong. He argued that the issue of a Briton's 'freedom' had been settled in the seventeenth century, since when the history of Britain had been essentially an imperial one, centred 'not in England but in America and Asia'. But that is emphatically not what British schoolchildren before the 1900s were taught.

This may seem strange. If the Empire was a matter of national pride, you would have expected it to have been rammed down the throats of children at school. Patriotism, after all, is generally one of the things schooling is about. In many countries this is quite open, as in the flag-raising ceremonies that start the day in many American schools. This is one of the ways society is held together. In nineteenth century Britain, however, it was not. 'Patriotism' was considered dangerous.

propagandists.

As a result, the vast majority of nineteenth century English children could have received no serious education in imperialism at all. In 1902 an MP recounted how, when he asked a class of school leavers who among them had heard of the Indian Mutiny, only one boy raised his hand. This was at a school where history was taught, but stopped at the Tudors (just before the Empire proper, therefore). That was apparently





The reality of empire for many working-class men was the discomfort of army life, as in this episode from Delhi, 1857.

Early on it was mainly associated with radical ideas like 'citizenship' – '*aux armes, citoyens*'. Britons were never 'citizens', of course, but 'subjects' of the Crown – something that only changed officially in 1983. They also belonged to *classes*. It was the mutual obligations between those classes that bound society together. The working classes needed to respect and obey their betters; the upper classes to serve and protect those beneath them; the middle classes to create the wealth that trickled down and up to both. This, therefore, was what was drummed into children in their schools: their class roles, rather than their 'Britishness'. The upper classes were taught how to rule – at home as well as abroad. This is why they did not need to be taught about their Empire; ruling was the same everywhere – they could learn about the people they had to rule on the job. In their schools the workers were mainly taught their social role too: hard work, obedience, frugality, the errors of socialism. The middle classes were taught individual 'freedom'. (Hence the bias of their history books.) There was no possible use for imperialism, or indeed any kind of patriotism, in any of this. Even imperialists did not see any point in it. In 1893 a former Colonial Secretary, Lord Kimberley, speaking on the question of whether schoolchildren ought not to be given some education in imperial patriotism, opined that they would be better off

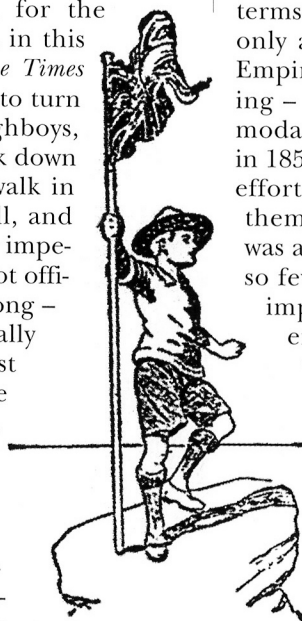
'given practical lessons in the geography of their own localities', rather than 'being shown maps [of the empire] they are not well versed in, and which do not convey much to their minds'.

Behind all this was a deeper upper-class fear of any kind of broader education for the 'masses', expressed in this quotation from *The Times* in 1880: 'is it going to turn the heads of ploughboys, and make them look down on their destined walk in life?' That says it all, and largely explains why imperial education was not officially promoted among – indeed, was actually kept from – at least 80 per cent of the English population in the nineteenth century.

If a national imperial commitment was not necessary to keep the people onside politically, it was no more necessary from the point of

view of Empire. Those red-painted world maps are misleading in another way. They give an entirely false impression of British imperial power. Most of the Empire was ruled through accommodations with local people: settlers in places like Canada and Australia, traditional rulers elsewhere. This does not make it any less 'imperial'; but it does mean that Britain's imperialism could be managed in a way that had a minimal impact upon the British people, in terms of cost and personnel. It took only a handful of men to rule the Empire, and even – relatively speaking – to police it, when the accommodations broke down, as in India in 1857-58. It did not need a national effort to sustain it. The imperialists themselves did not want this. This was another reason why there were so few calls for a more widespread imperial education before the end of the century. On the whole, the small class that was directly involved with it preferred to keep it to themselves. It was their empire, not the 'people's'.

This may have been just as well, for the 'people' clearly had other priorities. The



CHAPTER IX

PATRIOTISM; Or, Our Duties as Citizens

Baden-Powell's *Scouting for Boys* (1904) may have had less of an imperialising effect than its author would have liked.



In 1904 architects J.P. Seddon and E.B. Lamb designed the Imperial Monumental Halls and Tower to dwarf Parliament and Westminster Abbey. But they were never built.

as from nationalists in the colonies themselves. Quite suddenly it looked as though the imperialist classes might need some broader popular support after all. This was when the big imperial propaganda movement started, particularly after the scare of the Anglo-Boer War in 1899-1902. In itself, of course, this suggests that popular commitment to the Empire was weak at that time. This is certainly what zealous imperialists felt. From them one gets a very different picture of the state of popular imperialism in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries than from certain modern scholars. The workers, especially, were entirely unreliable. You wait, warns one of Galsworthy's upper-middle-class characters caught up in the 'Mafeking' mob in London in May 1900 in *In Chancery* (1920); they might seem encouragingly imperialist now:

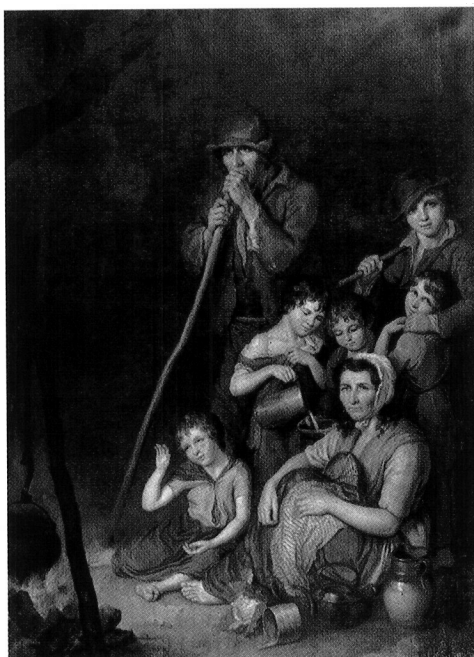
... but some day they would come in different mood! ... One of these days we shall have to fight these chaps, they're getting so damned cheeky – all radicals and socialists. They want our goods.

working classes had to struggle to keep alive for most of the century; nearly all their time was taken up with that. This was also where they channelled their political energies: into improving their condition collectively. The empire had no relevance to this, except as a place of exile in the last economic resort, or worse if they were reduced to serving (and dying) as soldiers there, which was not likely to warm them to it as an idea. The middle classes had more time for the empire; but it was marginal to most of their basic concerns too. We have seen where their dominant values lay, from the sort of history they were taught in their schools. Those values might support an entrepreneurial, hard-working, settler type of colonialism at a pinch, but not the 'ruling', Indian sort.

Indeed, a careful study of middle-class attitudes to the colonies during the bulk of the nineteenth century shows that they distinguished strictly between what Peter Marshall calls the 'libertarian' and 'authoritarian' kinds of colonial rule. Nearly all their enthusiasm, such as it was, went to the former – and also, incidentally, to the United States of

America, as representing its culmination. So it was not British *rule* – the imperialism, strictly speaking – that interested them about these lands. The only class that really went for the 'ruling' sort of empire in this period was the one whose function was to rule. They were the genuinely imperialist section of British society,

This suited the Empire for most of the nineteenth century, as we have seen. Towards the end of that century, however, this changed. The Empire started coming under threat from other European powers, as well



For some, the Empire was a place to emigrate to. These 19th-century Irish emigrants depicted by John Barker were in Australia.

Scarcely any contemporary imperialist regarded 'jingoism' as any indication of a reliable popular imperialism. As late as 1931 the chairman of the Empire Day movement, founded at the turn of the century to encourage imperial patriotism, was still grumbling that there were:

... still many dark corners in Great Britain, especially in the industrial areas, where the rays of our Empire sun have not yet been able to penetrate.

Hence the propaganda.

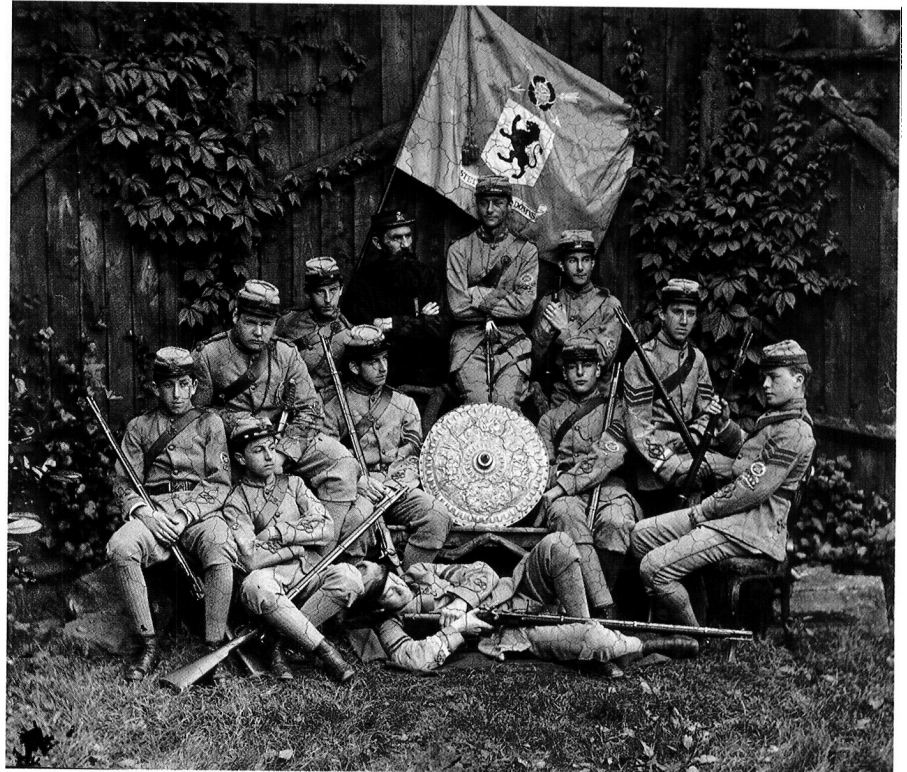
It is difficult to be certain about its impact. Of course one should not take the imperialists' word for it; right-wingers tend to be pessimistic, and most of these ones hardly knew the bulk of their compatriots well. (Some of them weren't even compatriots. A surprising number of the leading imperialists of the early twentieth century were either foreigners, brought up in India, or educated in Germany.) Much of the propaganda certainly met with a cool response:

Audience gave the impression of suspicion, of hostility to the subject and of considerable indifference to the conditions prevailing in the colonies,

was the Victoria League executive committee's note on one awkward attempt to reach a 'lower-class' audience, through the Workers' Educational Association, in 1911.

Imperial propaganda was at its most successful when there was plenty of sugar to cover the pill; as with Empire Day (a half-holiday), all those imperial stories for boys by Henty and co. (the derring-do), Scouting (the games and the camping out), Empire exhibitions (the fun-fairs), and so-called music-hall imperialism (the tunes). (In fact only a very tiny number of music hall songs even during the Boer war years were unambiguously imperialist. Most longed for sweethearts left at home, worried about fathers at the front, or bemoaned the ordinary squaddie's lot.) How much of the pill

Crowds celebrated the relief of Mafeking in May 1900: but to some upper-class Britons the jingoism expressed here did not indicate a very committed imperialism.



Ready for bigger game: the shooting team at Harrow School in 1875.

went down with the sugar is hard to say. Jeffrey Richards thinks the workers were too 'unintellectual' to resist it. Many working-class autobiographers claim to have resisted it nonetheless; but they were certainly unrepresentative – 'intellectual' almost by definition. There are no objective measures of public opinion from this time. (The first systematic government survey, in 1948, revealed an amazing ignorance of and lack of commitment to the colonies *then*.) In any case people could have imbibed Empire-related attitudes unconsciously, without real-

ising their implications. Racism is an obvious example, although the connection between this and imperialism is not at all straightforward. So we cannot know for certain.

What seems likely, however, is that imperialism in a strict, or narrow, sense of the term did not permeate British society very much more in the early twentieth century than it had in the nineteenth. This was for some of the same reasons, though not all. Society was still divided by class. This still determined people's main interests and priorities, as we can see from the major domestic events of the time: the General Strike, the depression, the rise of Labour and so on. So were the schools. Great efforts were made to

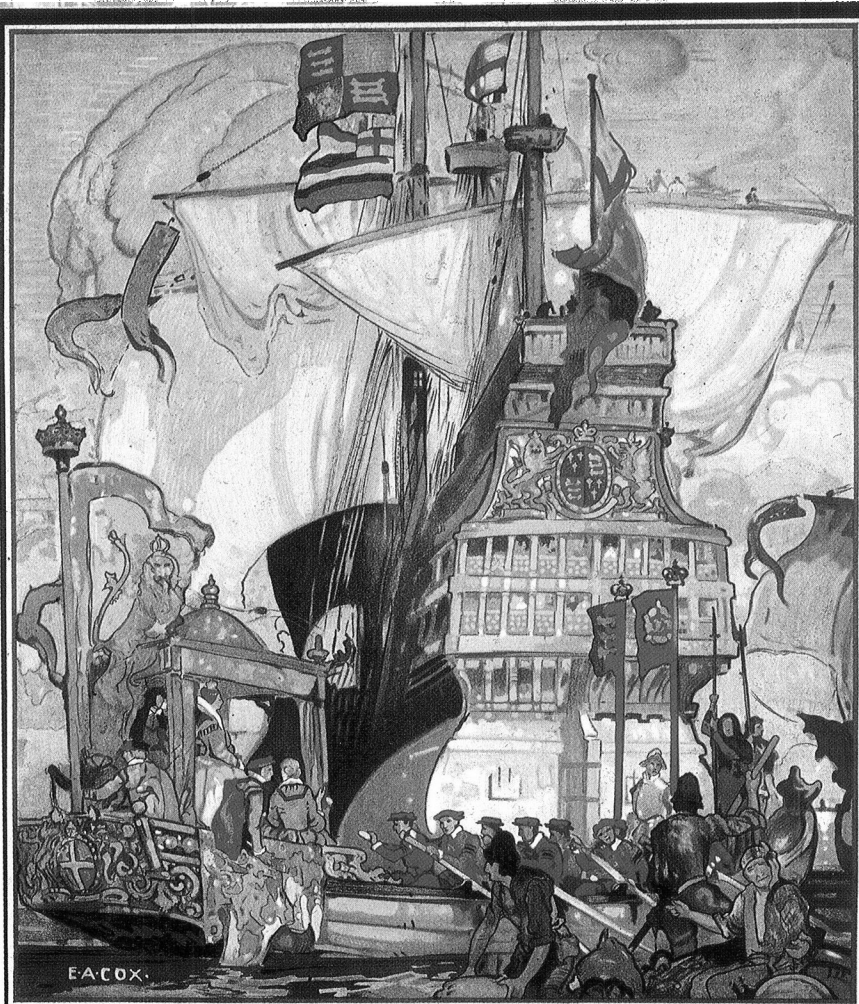


The British Empire Exhibiton of 1924 at Wembley appealed as much for its fun-fair as for its imperial message.

bolster imperial education after the 1880s – free distribution of the maps was one – but there continued to be obstacles here. A Salford schoolboy called Robert Roberts recalled in his memoir being indoctrinated with imperialism at school in the 1900s, and is often quoted as evidence of this; but he is almost the only such example. A problem with elementary schools at the time was supposed to be their teachers, who generally came from the pupils' own class and had the reputation of being dangerously left-wing. There is little solid evidence that any substantial degree of 'imperialism' got through to girls and boys in these schools before the First World War. Working- and middle-class autobiographies (apart from Roberts') suggest the same with respect to people's adult lives.

Certainly the dominant values of British society, apart from its highest reaches, were not particularly Empire-related. Some of those values seemed to fly in the face of imperialism: British 'freedom', for example, which was still the main message of the history books even after 1900. It is noticeable that this did not give rise to any very widespread anti-imperial feeling (though there was some); but it cannot be inferred from this that people necessarily supported the Empire. Most appear to have been apathetic to it, or too busy with their lives to care much about it.

The way in which it was presented was also important. Here the propaganda may have had an effect. After the First World War, in particular, both school textbooks and imperial propaganda in general radically shifted their ground. The Empire was pictured differently from before: no longer as a matter of conquest and glory, but as a 'family', peacefully acquired and lovingly nurtured in liberalism; an example, if you like, of 'internationalism', the new buzzword of these League of Nations years. The new term 'Commonwealth' expressed this. It was mainly a travesty, but it was a significant one. It suggests that imperialism *pur* – in the usual meaning of the word, implying subjection and control – was still not widely acceptable in Britain. The thing had to be dis-



BRITAIN'S PAST & PRESENT BECKON YOU TO WEMBLEY BRITISH EMPIRE EXHIBITION

April to October 1924

guised to make it so. Even most Britons who were imperialists, therefore, may not have been so for strictly imperialistic reasons. Other 'discourses' were far more powerful.

It is a mistake, therefore, in studying the social history of Britain in this period, to focus on imperialism too much. It existed, but was thinly spread, patchily distributed, and never dominant. Britain was an imperial nation, but never a truly imperial society. It is important to bear this in mind, and not be too misled by the footprints. The relative lack of imperial commitment could, after all, have been a factor behind the Empire's eventual fall.

FOR FURTHER READING

John MacKenzie, *Propaganda and Empire: The Manipulation of British Public Opinion 1880-1960* (Manchester UP, 1984); John MacKenzie (ed.), *Imperialism and Popular Culture* (Manchester UP

1986); Jeffrey Richards (ed.), *Imperialism and Juvenile Literature* (Manchester UP, 1989); Edward Said, *Culture and Imperialism* (Chatto & Windus 1993); Catherine Hall, *Civilising Subjects: Metropole and Colony in the English Imagination 1830-1867* (Polity 2002); Richard Price, *An Imperial War and the British Working Class: Working-class Attitudes and Reactions to the Boer War 1899-1902* (Routledge 1972); Brian Simon, *The Two Nations and the Education Structure 1780-1870* (Lawrence & Wishart, 1960).

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READER OFFER:

History Today readers can buy *The Absent Minded Imperialists* for just £20.50 (RRP £25) with free p+p in the UK. Contact bookorders.uk@oup.com; phone 01536 741727 or fax 01536 454518, and quote reference 10PHHT04B.

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