



Review: [Untitled]

Reviewed Work(s):

British Imperialism. Innovation and Expansion, 1688-1914 and British Imperialism. Crisis and Deconstruction, 1914-1990 by P. J. Cain; A. G. Hopkins

Martin Lynn

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Few historiographical topics have had as many premature obituaries as that of British Imperialism. Equally, few historiographical topics can have reflected the concerns of their times so thoroughly. In the 1950s and 1960s, as Britain withdrew from her empire, the study of imperial history was considered increasingly unfashionable, with its practitioners seen as arthritic proconsuls obstinately 'staying on' as the legions returned home in the face of the Area Studies revolution. Even the burgeoning growth of interest in recent years might be said to reflect deeper concerns about the future of Britain in an uncertain world. Whatever the cause of this reawakening of interest, one of its most important features – as seen in the work of John Mackenzie and others on what might be termed imperial mentalities – has been the reintegrating of the metropole into the history of Empire. *British Imperialism. Innovation and Expansion, 1688–1914* and *British Imperialism. Crisis and Deconstruction, 1914–1990*, by P. J. Cain and A. G. Hopkins (London: Longman, 1993; pp. xv + 504, pp. xiv + 337. £38; pb. £16.99, £30; pb. £11.99) is a further contribution to this process. Cain and Hopkins challenge many of the assumptions about the history of British imperial expansion that developed in the 1960s and 1970s. The view that then held sway stressed the importance of developments on the 'periphery' of empire for understanding the processes of British expansion and retreat. Implicit in this was an assumption that British imperial expansion from the late nineteenth century onwards reflected a process of British 'decline', with colonies being seized as a rearguard action to stave off the inevitable, with these colonies than proving immensely difficult to maintain and with the story culminating in decolonization after 1945. Interwoven within this historiography

has been the debate over the role of strategic interests as against trading interests in explaining British expansion, and a focus on the African colonies and India at the expense of the white dominions. For Cain and Hopkins, events on the periphery were a symptom rather than a cause of imperial expansion. On the contrary, their determination is to shift the explanation for imperial expansion on to the metropole and, in doing so, away from the trade/strategy debate to the fortunes of what they see as central to Britain's world position, namely her financial services sector. The implication of this, they argue, is important not just for how historians see Britain's Empire, but also how they see the history of Britain itself. At the heart of their argument is the idea of 'gentlemanly capitalism' and the links between the landed interest and the City of London. These elements were united by 'the gentlemanly ethic (which) formed a tight bond between capitalist and non-capitalist elements within service capitalism' and which produced a gentlemanly elite, focused on the City and the south-east of England, whose position was at the heart of British political and economic life. Its power, they argue, remained remarkably resilient over the centuries. It was the changing needs of this gentlemanly capitalism, and above all the financial services sector at the centre of it, that lay at the heart of British imperial expansion. Cain and Hopkins elaborate this argument in a series of chapters that look first at the developments within gentlemanly capitalism and then at the degree to which such changes impinged on areas – from the white dominions through South America to India and elsewhere – around the world. They stress the need to go beyond the formal empire, as British finance did, to examine the totality of British influence, formal and informal, around the globe. They start this analysis from 1688, which they see as vital because it entrenched the landed interest and prompted the financial revolution that underlay gentlemanly capitalism. It was after 1850, however, that Britain's presence around the world began to increase significantly and this was less the result of 'decline' than of a 'dynamic and ambitious power' asserting itself successfully. The inter-war years, they argue, saw 'enduring vitality' in British influence overseas, while decolonization after 1945 should be seen not as the result of decay but of the Empire having served its purpose. This multifaceted and complex argument has inevitably been compressed here for reasons of space, but its implications are wide-ranging. For British history it stresses the importance of the south-east of England and the City in British politics and economy; and it stresses the central role of the Empire in domestic history. For imperial history it downplays the role of manufacturing and argues for the return of investments and financial services to the heart of the story. It questions the conventional chronology of expansion. It emphasizes the part played by gentlemanly values within Empire and thereby questions the way historians view the Empire itself: 'the imperial mission', Cain and Hopkins write, 'was the export version of the gentlemanly order'. These are stimulating and challenging volumes that represent a major contribution to the subject and whose conclusions will have to be addressed by all imperial historians. One of the main areas of debate already concerns the significance of gentlemanly capitalism: critics have questioned whether gentlemanly capitalism was as central to the process of imperial expansion as Cain and Hopkins suggest. This debate is only beginning and will no doubt continue for some time. Whichever way it is ultimately resolved, the fact of its existence is a positive sign and shows the continuing vigour of imperial history in the 1990s.

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Equally, it shows how changes in the debates of imperial history continue to reflect broader changes in the way Britain views itself and its past.

The Queen's University of Belfast

MARTIN LYNN