

Simon Schama on 'Empires of the Imagination'

Review by Prof. Simon Schama (Columbia)

Financial Times, March 20, 2010

Empires of the Imagination: Politics, War and the Arts in the British World 1750-1850 By Holger Hoock *Profile* £30, 512 pages

When was your imagination last fired up by a monument or a public statue? Unless you are Holger Hoock, who can't get enough of the acres of tombs in Westminster Abbey and St Paul's Cathedral, it's a safe bet that all those dauntless heroes expiring in stone for king and country will leave you as cold as the marble in which they're frozen.

London is full of statues of the imperial great and good – Scots-Irish conquistadors, dukes sitting heavily in their stirrups, the bronze-whiskered, jaw-jutting butchers and blunderers, ignored by most since the day after they were unveiled. But in his hefty, exceptionally learned and exhaustively (god, how exhaustively) researched book, the historian Dr Hoock wants us to believe that between the accession of King George III and the middle of the 19th century, a programme of patriotic celebration in stone and paint, buildings and spectacles gave Britons a fresh awareness of what it meant to be part of a (mostly) victorious, martial empire.

That we just about believe him by the end of the book is a tribute to Hoock's storytelling. He is at his best when he abandons microwaved social theory and drops the reader into a Rowlandsonian scene of vainglorious, chest-beating, enemy-pulping, Hanoverian ra-ra. He describes the wives of peers at the coronation banquet in Westminster Hall banished to the gallery and forced to lower baskets to pick up the odd cold fowl; scale models of battleships reproducing Trafalgar on the Serpentine at George's jubilee; the pagoda catching fire and roasting the paddling swans, to the delight of the crowd who assumed it was all part of the show.

Hoock's feel for the creative disorderliness of the time is a pleasure, for it was, after all, through yarn-spinning that Britain's sense of itself as a nation of conquerors got imprinted on the popular mind. He entertains us with the story of the treacherous Benedict Arnold's liaison with the British spy Major John André. Carrying incriminating documents, André was arrested by some eagle-eyed militiamen who noticed tell-tale traces of wig powder in his hair. George Washington had André executed as a spy, but he had the better of posterity. Setting the noose around his own neck while speaking of his "honest zeal for my King's service", he forced grudging admiration from Americans and guaranteed himself a (slightly weird) Adam tomb in Westminster Abbey.

Empires of the Imagination is two books in one. Some of the best chapters are not about the orchestration of patriotic enthusiasm but a different – though equally gripping – subject: the extraction of antiquities from vanquished cultures too exhausted to resist or, so the exporters liked to pretend, indifferent to their preservation. Some of this curatorial piracy was motivated by cultural one-upmanship over the French – for example, the Rosetta Stone, prised from the infuriated grip of Napoleon's defeated and abandoned *savants-général*s.

But Hoock is right to argue that much of the almost manic urge to survey, record and understand Hindu and Buddhist inscriptions and statues was driven by a genuine thirst for knowledge. That doesn't make the spiriting away of Egyptian heads or Assyrian relief

carvings any less of an exercise in cultural imperialism. Anyone who has been to Xanthos and seen the dismal cement infill on one of the great masterpieces of antiquity, the Lycian Harpy tomb (the original having been shipped off by Charles Fellows to the British Museum), might not share Hooock's celebration of the learned energy of the plunder. But he is right to recognise the openness of the Regency generations of archaeologists and epigraphers.

It didn't last. One of Hooock's heroes in the exploration of Indian archaeology was James Prinsep, the erudite, multilingual secretary of the Asiatic Society and decipherer of the Brahmi rock edicts of Asoka. But in 1835, his brother HT Prinsep lost a famous, fateful battle with Thomas Macaulay over whether the East India Company ought to continue to subsidise "native" education or aggressively promote western learning, thus "liberating" Indians from what Macaulay contemptuously dismissed as absurd superstitions. Five years later James Prinsep died in London; the cause of cultural pluralism had broken on the rock of Victorian self-admiration.

What Hooock might have noticed were he not quite so invested in the notion that all of his subject matter somehow contributed to "helping the empire imagine itself" is that the two phenomena he describes were actually at war with each other. The muscular martyrology entombed in St Paul's and Westminster ultimately would have no truck with a genuine openness to the marvels wrought by non-white races. The imagination of empire became debased into the canon of the ripping yarn and the gospels of veldt and jungle. Victorian children were transported in their histories to Ujiji and to Omdurman, leaving to the true realm of the imperial imagination just one, peerless traveller. But then Rudyard Kipling's is quite another story.

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