

BOOK REVIEW

Josh Doble, Liam Liburd, and Emma Parker, eds. **British Culture after Empire: Race, Decolonisation and Migration since 1945**

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British Culture after Empire is part of a growing body of work that takes seriously the impact of the British Empire on the metropole and seeks to examine the many lasting effects of the Empire on all aspects of British life. The editors argue persuasively that it is only if we speak to each other across disciplines that we will be able to unpick some of the many imperial threads that are “woven into the fabric of everyday life” (14). The introductory chapter is an engaging and rich conversation about how we can and should conceptualize the manifold legacies of Empire in contemporary Britain, including a useful discussion of these issues in relation to the four nations that make up Britain. The authors, and many contributors, argue that one of the most important and lasting legacies of Empire is to be found in government thinking and public discourses about race and racial discrimination. The volume seeks to show that “the afterlives of empire are a fluid and constructive force within contemporary Britain, shaping our cultural, social and political spheres” (5).

The book is organized into four main parts plus a foreword, introduction, and afterword. In the first part, “Institutions of Empire,” chapters discuss issues related to museums, academic disciplines, and institutions themselves. The aims and foci of this part are wide ranging but work together to highlight the need for more focused attention to how many British institutions were either actively involved, or complicit, in the running of Empire. In thinking about Britain “after” empire, therefore, we need to be more attuned to the ways in which many institutions maintain their imperial ways of doing and ways of knowing. The second, and shortest, part of the book “Writing identity, conflict and class”, while interesting, is perhaps the least successful in demonstrating the editor’s aims of crossing disciplinary boundaries. Both of the chapters focus on published written works, both fiction and non-fiction, highlighting the importance of authorial identity and published work, although coming to somewhat contradictory conclusions. Dominic Davies’s chapter articulates how author’s biographies work to successfully link the global and institutional legacies of empire with lived reality, while Ed Dodson’s chapter shows the importance of taking a postcolonial lens to the work of scholars whose biographies have previously led to their exclusion from such analysis. The third part, “Racial others, national memory,” contains three chapters that work well together to highlight the important role of memory and history in understandings of the empire. They do not solely focus on historical accounts, however, instead successfully demonstrating the ways in which understandings of the past inform and direct actions and activities in the present. The final part of the book, “At home in postcolonial Britain,” is the largest and possibly most diverse part. It includes discussions of Arab British fiction, black

beauty spaces, London nightlife in the 1980s, and an interview with Tribe Arts based in Leeds. Despite the diversity of topics covered, this part works together to demonstrate the varied and connected ways in which race, identity, and space have been shaped by imperial ideas and how these ideas continue to shape understandings of self and others. In his afterword, Bill Schwarz pulls together these many threads with a focus on the “wildness of Britain after empire” (264) arguing that decolonization, like the colonial project itself, was messy, contradictory, and discombobulating.

Like all edited collections, some of the chapters contained within are much stronger than others. Unfortunately, one of the weakest chapters here was that by Donkyong Sim about the disturbances at the London School of Economics in the late 1960s. There were a few interesting moments here, and the premise that more attention should be paid to the imperial connections of Britain’s universities is true. Unfortunately, this chapter did not engage with the significant literature about these issues, particularly how discussions about race were taking place among British students during the 1960s, and does not adequately understand the nature of students in Britain in this period, or institutions like the LSE, and did not draw on the LSE student newspaper *Beaver* which would have helped shed light on these issues and is freely available online. On the contrary, one of the most successful chapters was that by Mobeen Hussain. As well as being well written and fascinating, it was the chapter that most fully took up the call of the editors to cross disciplinary boundaries and mix methodologies using both fiction and historical sources to explore the establishment of Black communities and identities in Britain as a result of “various transatlantic social exchanges and movements” (221).

Together the various chapters of this book raise important questions. They ask us to think about our methodologies, and particularly about how these have been determined by the disciplines of which we imagine ourselves part. While the editors call for an interdisciplinary approach, in the main this book is made up of chapters that themselves adhere to individual disciplinary boundaries. The collection as a whole also raises a number of points about the interactions between popular and academic debates and understandings of the past. It variously shows these discourses as working together and in opposition at different moments and helps us, as academic historians, think through the ways in which our research can and should be disseminated, discussed, and informed in conversation with other groups. The particular role and responsibility of academics, and academic institutions, is also discussed in a number of chapters throughout the book. Many, if not all, of the institutions discussed are elite and it would have been nice to see some discussion of the nature of elite institutions and the legacy of Empire in the persistence of institutional hierarchies and notions of elite status.