GENERAL EDITOR’S INTRODUCTION

It has been the central tenet of the ‘Studies in Imperialism’ series that empires can be understood as much by the study of their cultural manifestations as by their political and military phenomena. That was the motivation for my researching and writing *Propaganda and Empire* in the early 1980s. Then the series was founded in 1985 in the belief that this was an expanding and important field, a proposition that has been well borne out over the subsequent three decades. The point is that the cultural expressions of imperialism have the capacity to illuminate the social, economic, scientific and environmental aspects of the imperial condition as well as, crucially, relationships with indigenous peoples. In the process, the more commonly studied dimensions of the history of the British and other empires are themselves rendered more fully rounded since the cultural is of course deeply embedded in its political, administrative, social and economic contexts.

Moreover, recent cultural studies have demonstrated the weakness of some of the fashionable theoretical positions adopted by scholars of imperialism in recent times. Far too much emphasis has been laid upon the allegedly all-embracing hegemonic relationships of empire, upon a notion of a monolithic imperialism which, in a sense, carries all before it, dominating ‘others’ to the extent of even rendering them supposedly speechless. Of course, the fact that empires operated within conditions of extremes of unequal power relationships cannot be gainsaid. Imperialism was a powerfully transforming force in all sorts of ways. But the rule of empires was always in some senses limited. Extensive legal provisions, for example over environmental matters and activities such as hunting, looked intimidating on paper, but were seldom fully effective, or even minimally so, in many areas of colonies. Nevertheless, the lives of indigenous peoples were modified in all sorts of ways. Dispossession, violent destruction and death were central to the imperial experience in too many places, but some peoples managed to keep aspects of their lives intact and many moved into highly perceptive and astute modes of negotiation with the new conditions under which they laboured. While Europeans were often seized by the dominant ideologies of imperialism, still they were a diverse lot, adopting many different cultural and intellectual positions in relation to the multifaceted cultural expressions of empire. Of course this is not to say that we leave the mosaic of empire broken into a myriad of scattered tesserae. As Lambert and Lester have argued, the challenge remains to link the ‘local and particular’ to the ‘general and universal’.
This book constitutes another contribution to a new revisionist approach, rejecting as many of its contributions do both a simplistic binary approach to the imperial experience and the notion that empires were overwhelming expressions of European technological superiority. It offers more evidence for the contention of recent studies of the British Empire that an emphasis must be laid upon its multifarious character. While it is possible to chart extraordinarily similar developments across the empire (for example, in the founding of institutions such as museums), and indeed in other European empires as well, still this is a parallelism which should not be allowed to conceal the highly pluralist character of these cultural productions. Such pluralism is one of the themes of the book. The essays range across many issues and interpretations of museums in Australia and New Zealand, West and East Africa, India and Sri Lanka, and also in Britain itself. In all of these the connections between ‘metropole’ and ‘periphery’ are emphasised, but the analyses demonstrate that older diffusionist notions have to be replaced by much more interactive and multilateral connections among the various components of empire. We hear of the activities of travellers and collectors; of indigenous contributions and reactions as they negotiated their way through the dangers and opportunities of the museum environment; of the relationship between memory and the historical record, not least in the commemoration of war; of the mixture of reluctance and enthusiasm on the part of governors as they resisted expenditure on what they regarded as unproductive museums or set about creating a means (as they saw it) of saving the artefacts, historic sculptures and aesthetic values of local peoples; of the significance of museums as centres of scientific research; of the importance of individual curators, male and female, as they struggled with the limitations of their colonial contexts, demonstrating in the process their abilities and predilections; and even of the connections between museum foundation and development and the processes of decolonisation.

The London conference on which this collection is based was an exceptionally stimulating occasion, and it is therefore highly satisfying to introduce this resulting publication and congratulate the editors on bringing it together so expeditiously. As with many such collections, this can be seen as a start, albeit a highly effective one, to the pursuit of studies in this field. There are of course many more museums that are worthy of study and also further themes to be explored. My list, which is by no means comprehensive, would include:

- the manner in which museums were inseparably bound up with the extension of the bourgeois public sphere across empires, reflecting the transition from aristocratic to middle-class rule as well as the
ways in which such classes proceeded to organise themselves and disseminate their values;

• the role of missionaries in collecting and donating to museums, exhibiting their particular concerns in the process;

• the connections between museums and education (here touched on in one or two of the chapters) as well as the relationship with universities which, in the twentieth century, largely took over their scientific role as many sciences shifted their prime location from fieldwork to laboratories;

• the development of professionalisation in the staffing of museums and its spread across the British Empire and Commonwealth, often detracting from the former international character of the networks and appointments of museum personnel;

• the importance of museums in gender relations as well as in their emergence as a locus of female employment and scientific activity, starting in the late nineteenth century and developing greatly in the twentieth (as in Zanzibar);

• the significance of museum architecture as an expression of intellectual power and of aspects of imperial, colonial and local identities.

Others will inevitably have additional interests and concerns, which only serves to show what a rich and fascinating field is constituted by the study of museums as well as of other related institutions such as art galleries, libraries, zoos, botanic gardens, and scientific and literary societies. In the meantime, this book is an exceptionally welcome addition to the literature, which will contribute to the historic dimensions of museum studies and to reflections upon colonialism and ‘others’, as well as to imperial historiography more generally. Above all, like all the best books, it should stimulate the development of further work in the field.

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