GENERAL EDITOR’S INTRODUCTION

The British empire was actually an amalgam of Irish, Scottish, Welsh and English empires. The appellation ‘British’ should not obscure the many and varied influences that went into its construction and the modes of exploitation supported by its political, social and professional practices. This is not just a matter of different ethnicities among settlers in what became the ‘dominions’ or among the personnel, civilian and military, of India and the so-called ‘dependent’ empire. It was also a case of the working through of different domestic experiences in the areas of politics, society and the environment. It was additionally connected with a variety of educational systems, religious affiliations, and historical and cultural traditions. All of these were important in a variety of ways. Individual attitudes and motivations were unquestionably influenced, if in heterogeneous ways, by the politics, social norms, economic conditions and environmental characteristics of a ‘home’ that was in effect a number of homelands. Professional and vocational aptitudes were affected by differing emphases and pedagogical systems in the schools and universities/colleges of the peoples of such homelands. Moreover, their sense of ethnic solidarity and concerns with the manner in which empire could and, from their point of view, should influence indigenous societies were rooted in the religious, historical and cultural forms in which they had been nurtured. Embedded within these were philosophical and intellectual traditions which also modified their approaches to their professions.

A modern historiography is exploring these ethnic dimensions of the British imperial experience in increasing detail. A good deal of work has already been done on the Scots. A volume of essays on the Welsh will shortly be published in the ‘Studies in Imperialism’ series, and a pioneering collection on Ireland, edited by Keith Jeffery, appeared in this series in 1996, later followed by books on aspects of migration, law, and transnational influences in the development of twentieth-century nationalism. More generally, work on Irish migration, by scholars such as Akenson and Fitzpatrick, is already extensive as well as notable in quality. A good deal of research has been done on the characteristics and influence of people from Ireland in the various former territories of settlement of the British empire. Crosbie has examined the significance of the Irish in certain professions and the ‘Companion Series’ of the Oxford History of the British Empire contains a volume edited by Kevin Kenny. This book adds a significant new dimension to this considerable,
but by no means complete, corpus of work. It takes up the assertion that imperialism can only be truly understood in terms of the local and the interactions between such localities both in the empire and in the different social units of the British and Hibernian Isles. O’Leary examines these exchanges between specific areas of Ireland and one of the key parts of India, namely Punjab and the north-west frontier. For the British, Punjab was always strategic, not only in geopolitical/military terms, but also in respect of frontier theory, administrative practice, ethnic and religious diversity, communal tensions, land settlement practices and environmental, particularly hydrological, conditions. As it happens, these diverse aspects of the strategic continued right down to the era of the Indian independence movement, the tragedies of the Partition of the subcontinent, and the strained relations between the successor states of India and Pakistan. Twentieth-century contemporaries even made connections between north-west India and Northern Ireland by dubbing Punjab the ‘Ulster of India’.

In this study we have an examination of Irish members of the administration of this highly significant region of British India, together with their relations with fellow Irish figures (or aristocrats connected with Ireland through extensive land-owning) such as viceroys and other senior figures within the wider Indian imperial system. Beyond this we have an analysis of Irish doctors in the Indian medical services, civilian and military, and of engineers in the Public Works Department. As fascinating sidelights, we also have some quantitative and qualitative consideration of the Irish in Ceylon (Sri Lanka) and the Straits Settlements and federated Malay states (now Malaysia and Singapore). All of this is important because it reveals the key roles played by the Irish from all parts of the island and from a variety of religious and social backgrounds. We learn of the extent to which they interacted with each other, of the manner in which their Irishness influenced their approaches to India (or in some cases seems to have failed to have offered any influence at all). Would things have been different if the personnel had not been Irish? Would policies in specific instances have been more or less conservative? Would medical research have taken different courses? Would great engineering projects have been accomplished as comprehensively and as swiftly as they were? All of these questions are addressed and the book adds considerably to the Irish historiography as well as offering ideas and methodologies for similar studies elsewhere in both India and the ‘British’ empire.

John M. MacKenzie