

**Is Bernard Porter's Absent-Minded Imperialists useful for the study
of Empire and British national culture?**

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The title of my paper poses the question I want to put before this session. Does Bernard Porter's Absent Minded Imperialists have anything to teach us about the way we see the relationship between Empire and national culture in Britain?

The answer is that I think that it does. But I also think that the way he set up and presented his argument, with its polemical and contentious edge, and the way some of his critics fell into the trap he had set by responding with contempt and dismissal of his arguments have obscured the uses to which Bernard Porter may be put - perhaps even against his will.

The way Porter set up his argument suggested that the intellectual framework to examine empire's relationship to British national culture could only consist of binary opposites. I should note that in his recent writing on empire, Andrew Thompson used a similar methodology to Porter - especially, the test of empirical evidence - without occasioning the same fierce response. But the way Porter posed his argument was to suggest that the question was either/or: either Empire was or it was not in the culture.

What Porter did *not* do, then, and what he can be truly critiqued for not doing, was to propose a more fruitful framework of analysis than the one he was interrogating.

Of course, in this respect Porter was not only provoking post colonial-inspired scholarship. He was also mirroring some of its most disabling tendencies. Neither Porter nor his critics actually look at *empire*; they proceed from the metropolitan culture. It is pretty easy to poke fun at a scholarship that has practiced a form of empire reductionism, so that everything in British culture is taken as evidence of empire, from literary modernity, to tea drinking to drawing room gossip. But neither is it very helpful for those of us who actually want to put the empire into British history in ways that will enhance our understanding of both rather than create a false dichotomy between them. Dichotomies which, on the one hand, dismiss the relevance of empire to national culture and on the other ignore the complexities of how domestic culture is created and operates.

I want to also say that I believe that the questions that Porter raises are legitimate. They need to be confronted in a constructive way because they do speak to ways of historical understanding that in fact **can** enhance the way we see the relationship between empire and national culture. Indeed, I think that a proper appreciation of those questions can serve to push forward the paradigm through which the cultural relationship between Britain and empire is perceived.

I happen to think this is important, not merely for reasons of intellectual enlightenment. I think it is important, also, as a way of avoiding the arthritic ossification that is always ultimately associated with "new" historiographies.

Ultimately, it is not very helpful to count up how many references to empire there were in the culture. Even if there are just a handful of ways in which empire can be seen reflected in the culture, they still need explanation and conceptualization. But by the same token, Porter has shown that empire cannot just be read into domestic culture.

My sense then, is that we need a more sophisticated model for understanding the link between empire and national culture than either Porter or those he is critiquing have provided. What are some of questions in that respect that Porter has raised that it would be useful to engage with?

Change over time. Discussions of the role of empire in national culture need to focus more on how that role has differed and shifted over time. One of the features of much post colonial thinking is not to be much interested in change over time. Yet change over time is at the heart of historical understanding. It should in fact be the first question historians ask and it is the central mission of history to explicate.

The “idea” of Britain has always been associated with empire. But that identity was structured and articulated very differently at the beginning of Britain’s emergence as a nation state during the Tudor era than it was by the middle of the nineteenth century.

The importance of context. And in particular I would say this: **the relative weight that is given to empire in comparison to other themes in national culture.** The questions Porter poses in this respect **could** form the grounding for a very interesting and fruitful debate. It is a huge mistake to ignore the contexts that Porter points to:

- class differentiation and empire
- the culture of free trade for eg.
- the culture of parliamentary democracy
- religion
- local traditions; superstitions, witchcraft,
- Europe:** this is a very big one which has been totally ignored. Yet surely most Britons were *as* aware of France in say 1850, than they were the Xhosa, the Zulu, or the Indian?

But the third lesson that we can draw from Porter’s book, is the question:

How was Empire constructed in British culture and society? By this I mean, what was the relationship between Empire in Empire and how it was *represented* in the *domestic* spheres of British culture and society?

The representation of Empire in British domestic culture cannot be treated as an unproblematic depiction. I think this tends to be the case in much of the scholarship that Porter directs his fire towards.

How was the image or images of Empire constructed? What social and cultural and political processes went into this process? What purposes did these images serve in British domestic culture? What was their ideological, their social, their cultural function? What did the *silences* about empire in British culture mean? It is not enough to say with Edward Said that

those silences betray enormous presences. Nor is it enough to treat those silences as Porter does as revealing nothing. In this respect, we have to look at silence and ask, why it is there?

I think that Porter's critique has opened up the possibility of asking these questions. And they bring us squarely back to a truly *historical* enterprise.

Let me briefly illustrate this by way of missionary culture as an eg. A cultural presence in British society that is now beginning at last to get a bit of attention. Susan Thorne, Alison Twells.

Missionary culture in nineteenth century Britain was a very important sphere of social action and identity. It was a bit like the Temperance public that was created from the 1830s. It was one of those distinct sub-cultures that begin to occupy the public spaces of Victorian Britain. It was a place where community was built, where gender definitions were worked out, where a woman's sphere was constructed, where class-ness was asserted, where provincial civic society was developed.

But the question we need to ask is: what was the relationship between the definition of empire that this domestic culture?

In fact, it would seem (and not surprisingly so) that for *this* culture, empire served largely purposes of identity and social action that were *domestic* rather than imperial. The representation of empire that was contained in missionary culture at home was sharply at odds with the way Empire was in the empire. It was even sharply at odds with the way *missionaries* experienced the empire.

How was the *failure* of the missionary project in empire explained in British culture? How was the challenge to missionary world views from indigenous world views handled in the story of missionary work that was projected back home.

I actually have a case from South Africa of how such stories were reshaped in their representation in Britain from how they were actually experienced in the empire. [The story of Calderwood and Maqoma.]

The point is that how empire is represented in British culture is a function of the needs of that culture.

Thus, lets take a really big example that I obviously don't have time to talk about deeply. The history of empire is written both by traditional imperial historians and by the post colonially inspired "new" imperial historians as an unproblematic hegemon (instance the debate about the end of empire). One *could* write the history of empire as full of fragility from the very beginning and of an empire which was actually run by the colonized and not by the colonizers.

How is it that such a narrative of empire does not dominate the historiography? I think it is because there is a process of filtering and selecting in the culture that constructs a particular image of empire that is functional for the needs of that culture.

I have been impressed in my work on southern Africa by precisely the disjunction between empire on the ground and empire in the culture.

I am particularly taken with the way **Silence and Denial** work to shape the representation of empire in Britain.

There are many examples I could give of this. But let me just say that the image of Britain as a liberal empire was a complete lie. Violence, humiliation, murder, the perversion of the law were all integral to the *every day functioning of Empire*, as was military atrocity.

Let me end with a quick little story of General Sir George Pomeroy Colley. How many know who Colley was?

Majuba Hill. Was remarked that he died crying out, “Oh my men, do not run, stay with me?” as his soldiers streamed down Majuba hill under the rifle fire of the Boers. Now it was remarked that this was exactly the same words used by Tola, a Xhosa chief when he was killed by an expeditionary force led by Colley in the eastern Cape in 1858. Why would Colley use those words? Could it have been a guilty conscience? For Tola was not killed in a “fair fight” such as the Boers gave to Colley. He was the victim of an illegal punitive expedition Colley led which was designed to terrorize and kill Xhosa. Even the frontier administrators admitted that terrible atrocities had taken place on this raid, amongst which Tola and his sons were killed on Colley’s order and their bodies strung up on trees for the crows to pick apart.

But none of this appeared in the biography of Colley published after Majuba. The raid is mentioned, but it is presented, of course, as a legitimate response to offences by the Xhosa from across the border.

And this brings me back to Porter. Silence was also a strategy as well as an absence. Empire was absent in the ways Porter identifies partly because other things *were* important to British culture. We need to ask what they were, when the balance between them changes.

But empire was absent also because it was only a certain *kind* of empire that British culture needed. And I want to suggest that attention now be directed towards how *that* kind of empire was created and processed into the domestic culture.