**Another Little Patch of Red**

John MacKenzie

John MacKenzie suggests that imperial rule and the possession of empire were an essential component of British identity, life and culture for over 200 years from the mid-eighteenth to the mid-twentieth centuries.

A remarkable portrait from the late eighteenth century depicts a wealthy Glasgow merchant, John Glassford, surrounded by his family and with a black servant standing behind. Or it should show the servant behind. In fact, at some point in the nineteenth century, the servant was painted out. We only know about this because modern X-ray techniques have rediscovered the image of the black attendant. No one is quite sure why: was it because of sensitivities during the anti-slavery campaign or did it arise from a desire to render the portrait ‘racially pure’?

This example reflects the wider debate about the role of the British Empire in British culture and society. Just as the servant was literally brushed out, there  have been many attempts to divest domestic British society of its imperial connections. Many committed imperialists in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries were convinced that the British were not really interested in their empire. But the fully committed always worry about the commitment of others. Those who espouse a cause with quasi-religious fervour – as imperialists in the high noon of empire did – are always on the lookout for tangible evidence of such commitment, in membership of associations, adherence to specific causes, or voting patterns at elections. But the influence of empire upon British culture and society did not always take such obvious forms.

In the early twentieth century, J.A. Hobson, the economic theoretician of empire, wrote passionately about the extent of contemporary jingoism in British society during the Anglo-Boer War of 1899-1902. But by the middle years of the twentieth century a new breed of historian was emerging that actively wished to distance imperialism from British society. Radical scholars sought to study empire in fresh ways, yet they often remained more interested in the ‘official mind’ of imperialism rather than its ‘popular psychology’. To a certain extent, all of them reacted against Hobson; some later conceded that there might have been an outburst of imperial fervour at the turn of the century, but insisted that this was an aberration, a deviation from the norm of indifference.

Historians of Britain were keen to suggest that the working class, much more concerned with such hard-headed concerns as workers’ rights and the amelioration of depressed labour and social conditions, had been untainted by imperial ideologies. Marxist and quasi-Marxist interpretations suggested that imperialism had seduced the ‘aristocracy of labour’ into compliance with elite objectives or had served to blunt any revolutionary urges of the British, but these views were discounted by historians on what we would now call the ‘soft left’.

In the last few decades of the twentieth century, there was a further diversification of historical interests. Older concerns with political, administrative, constitutional and economic pasts were supplemented by new specialisms in social, gender, and cultural history. Cultural history was the new kid on the historical block and its practitioners became fascinated, among other things, with questions of identity, connecting such key areas as race, class, gender and nation.

The notion that British society could be described as an essentially imperial culture developed from this, and was partly influenced by the fact that the former colonial territories had produced sophisticated schools of historians. They were aware of the manner in which British culture had been everywhere projected into colonial life. A ‘British world’ had emerged from the myriad cultural forms dispersed around the colonies. Surely the British themselves could not have been immune to this cultural assault, so characteristic of imperial rule?

It is of course a matter of definition. The British Empire is difficult to define, precisely because of its complex history, the variety of its territories, and the diversity of their function. Some might see empire as reflected essentially in the colonies of white settlement, which seemed to offer so much opportunity to British migrants. Others might view it as resting principally on the ‘jewel in the Crown’, India, often described as a separate empire in itself. Some might see the colonies of the later nineteenth century, representative of the so-called ‘new imperialism’, as being characteristic. Or again, some might consider the fortresses, garrisons, and naval bases, dotted around the world as the bastions of an imperial seaborne system, as reflecting the true essence of imperial power.

Certainly, the latter seemed to fit with the ideas that emerged from the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, that empire was about dominion over the oceans. The acquisition and retention of territories in North America, the Caribbean, and Asia were based upon that essential belief. The absence of such maritime power rendered colonial enterprises difficult, as the Scots discovered with their ill-fated Darien scheme of the 1690s. The failure of that colony helped to propel them into the Union of 1707 and from then the term ‘British’ became more common. Moreover, the interests of large numbers of cities and towns in Scotland, England and Wales became bound up with the business of seaborne trade and commerce, much of it imperial. These conditions affected the ports and many towns which were soon connected to the coast by the new canal network.

By the second half of the eighteenth century, particularly after the Jacobite revolts, Scots became major ‘entryists’ into the whole imperial enterprise, through the ‘m’ professions: medical, military, maritime, mercantile, and later missionary. Many of the celebrated Scottish regiments – which governments have recently been laying down and amalgamating – were founded at this time. Ideas emanating from Scottish Enlightenment figures like William Robertson or Adam Smith became highly influential in North America and in India. Scots established potent patronage networks that gave them an extraordinary access to governorships and other forms of officialdom. They also soon established notable rates of migration. Indeed, so obvious were the Scots in all imperial ventures of the day that they became extremely unpopular among the English.

The Scottish historian Tom Devine has written that by the early nineteenth century:

A Taste of Empire, 1600-1800’ (January 1997).

* **John MacKenzie is Professor Emeritus, Lancaster University.**