

**The British Empire through its cities**

**Tristram Hunt, *Cities of Empire: The British Colonies and the Creation of the Urban World***

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Tristram Hunt's lively and readable *Cities of Empire: The British Colonies and the Creation of the Urban World* is a history of British imperialism told through its urban centres. Largely based on secondary sources, Hunt's individual chapters will not reveal anything new to the specialist. The contribution, rather, is in the connections and contrasts the author draws between each imperial site. As if in a relay race, each chapter illuminates a new imperial dynamic before passing the torch of empire to somewhere new.

Boston and Bridgetown (Barbados), the subjects of the opening chapters, trace Britain's early modern expansion into the Atlantic slave and sugar trades. Later chapters chart the shift from mercantilism under the East India Company in Calcutta to the free trade imperialism that fuelled the Opium Wars and the colonisation of Hong Kong. Hunt goes on to juxtapose the thriving industrial and multicultural metropolis of Bombay with the sterile and segregated capital of New Delhi. The Indic features of Bombay Gothic architecture gave way to the neoclassical design of by Edwin Lutyens in New Delhi and Herbert Baker's Secretariat Buildings (modelled after Pretoria's Union Buildings) while the British sought, literally and metaphorically, to find distance from the Indian people and environment, removing themselves to gated bungalow communities. The ossifying hierarchy and facile ritual of New Delhi embodied a shift away from more cosmopolitan visions of empire and reflected the deep seated imperial anxieties prevalent in the interwar period. New Delhi would be the "finest ruin of them all" according to the snide although prescient remark of the French president, Georges Clemenceau.

South African readers will find the imperial port of Cape Town, circa 1800, nestled strategically in Hunt's narrative as the pivot between the "First British Empire" in the Atlantic and the "Second British Empire" in India. In Hunt's account, British dominion in the Cape was the brainchild of Pitt the Younger's underrated War Secretary, Henry Dundas, who in the 1790s hoped to transition from an American model of settler colonialism (wounds inflicted by rebellious Bostonians were still fresh) to a commercial empire in the East. In Britain's quest for mercantile expansion and the military power to back it up, victualling stations like Cape Town proved indispensable. Hunt turns to the social history of Cape Town when he argues that British abolitionist rhetoric against Dutch slavery helped re conceive the British Empire as a bastion of liberty (even though slavery in Cape Town differed greatly from the harsher plantation slavery of Bridgetown). Nonetheless, Cape Town's primary contribution to the narrative is as the "first fortress" of India (to quote the

future Indian governor-general, Richard Wellesley who sojourned at Cape Castle and reappears in the Calcutta chapter). In the early 1800s, Cape Town "hardly touches" the African interior, Hunt argues, and readers have to wait until a later chapter on Melbourne to learn of the new wave of settler colonialism in the white dominions of the "Third British Empire" in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

Hunt gestures toward a politic even-handedness in his study of empire: the author himself inhabits both the "ivory tower" (as history lecturer at Queen Mary, University of London) and the House of Commons (as the Labour Party's shadow secretary of state for Education). Recognition (perhaps not enough?) of imperial violence and exploitation can be found in Hunt's vivid description of the "cage" in the centre of Bridgetown that brutally detained slaves found roaming after curfew. At other times, Hunt evokes a wistful sense of nostalgia an appeal, perhaps, to the popular audience he targets for a "loyal and royal" Boston (before it rebelled) or a stately and cosmopolitan Calcutta with "fluid ethnic boundaries" (before it was "cleaned up" as a backlash against notorious corruption scandals). Hunt casts his analysis as a balancing act between the neo-conservative Niall Ferguson and his more strident left-wing critics (a fruitless exercise, perhaps, and one that only revives a stale debate). For Hunt, however, the freshest moments of analysis seem to be those that excavate empire as the venue for cross-cultural interchange. The diversity of Cape Town, for example, forced the British to commit to religious and multicultural toleration overseas long before similar postures were assumed back in London. What Hunt achieves in a sweeping fast-paced narrative, he sometimes lacks in forthright analysis, however, and such insights, made in passing, could sometimes benefit from further exploration.

Hunt spans vast geographic spaces in his manageable text. Missing from his account, however, are colonised people themselves. The reader will learn much about Anglo-Indian picnics and the opulent lifestyles of Dublin's "Protestant Ascendancy", but the absence of "ordinary" working people is perhaps surprising given the author's background in Labour politics. The omission is not absolute the liberated slave Olaudah Equiano and the Bridgetown brothel-keeper Rachel Pringle make notable appearances but the relative absence of subalterns is regrettable. Consideration of Dublin's Catholic poor and the transnational networks of Indian Nationalists; or textile workers in Bombay and their counterparts in the environs of Liverpool; or Muslim lascars and Chinese stevedores, might have opened additional avenues to explore the sinews that stitch each city into a larger imperial history. Viceroy and field marshals were not the only agents of global connection.

Whatever its shortcomings, Hunt has achieved an impressive synthesis, one that at times is reminiscent of Linda Colley's writings in its narrative strength. What emerges is more than the sum of its parts, because Hunt reminds us of the empire's diversity and its many transformations through time. The book is a useful tool to expose upper-year undergraduates to the broad contours of British imperialism, and the author's unique position as both historian and politician will no doubt open instructive discussion. Is, for example, Hunt's sanguine suggestion that China will

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inherit the imperial mantle from Britain a considered intellectual prediction or a political ploy to encourage Chinese companies to invest in Liverpool (the subject of a final chapter on imperial decline) and the nearby constituency of Stoke on Trent, which Hunt represents in parliament?

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