

Title—The British Empire: Ramshackle or Rampaging: A Historiographical Reflection
Journal—The Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History
Author—John MacKenzie
Year—2015

Categories: Historiography, Imperialism, Empire, British Empire

Place: British Empire

Time: 20th Century

Argument Synopsis:

MacKenzie's article attempts to overview two tendencies within the historiography of the British Empire, a maximalist and minimalist view of empire. MacKenzie considers the binaries through which the influence and consequences of the British Empire have been evaluated as ramshackle (minimalist) or rampaging (maximalist). The goal of his article is to propose new ways of creating a syncretic route into the history of empire, one which attempts to reconcile different and contrasting approaches. He notes how there are two separate approaches within this historiography: imperial history, or attempting to write the history of empire as a whole, and area studies, or many histories of individual territories of the empire. He argues that the writing of imperial history came to be separated from some of its component parts by this divide.

MacKenzie is critical of the tendency within British Empire histories to take an essentially metropolitan rather than peripheral approach to surveys of the empire. He reveals that the history of the British Empire is usually viewed in isolation, failing to take into account parallel histories of other European empires. This tendency causes exceptionalism, or the notion that there is something distinct about the British experience that marks it as difference from other empires. MacKenzie strongly disagrees with this claim. MacKenzie provides an overview of some of the influential works and historians that have perpetuated both the ramshackle and the rampaging conception of empire. He concludes that the ramshackle should be seen as coexisting with rampaging, and this can be done most effectively by combining views from above with views from below. He notes how the view from above portrays reluctant politicians who were often acting reactively, but this ignored the on the ground reality of colonized people for whom the British empire never seemed to be reluctant or lacking in control.

He identifies some crucial elements that have informed the history of empire, namely continuity, intellectual history, material remains and the environment. MacKenzie underscores the environmental changes wrought by the arrival of the British, highlighting the profound changes to the sugar islands from forested to plantations. He argues that the biggest failure of the conception of the ramshackle empire is not taking the material remains or environmental consequences of empire into consideration. Especially when viewed from below, the empire had large environmental, economic, social, and cultural results that remain today.

Key Themes and Concepts:

- Two separate themes in writing the history of the British Empire: attempts to write the history of the empire as a whole and the many histories of individual territories and regions of the empire
- Nothing exceptional about the British Empire and it should be viewed in common with other empires
- The challenge of imperial history is to combine the view from above with the view from below