

Title—The Absent-Minded Imperialists: Empire, Society, and Culture in Britain
Author—Bernard Porter
Year—2004

Categories: Imperialism, Metropolitan Attitudes, Empire, Politics

Place: Britain

Time: 1820-1960

Argument Synopsis:

Porter's book attempts to make an argument about the degree to which the empire affected the British metropole, in particular considering domestic support for imperial rule. He is focused on the seeming incongruity that for the majority of the time Britain was ruling the largest empire ever, Britain did not look particularly imperial domestically. Porter identifies two potential solutions to this incongruity that have been argued in the historiography: the empire was not as important as it seemed, or the evidence of the impact may have been missed and/or covered up. In terms of the second argument, Porter highlights its two versions. One being that British historians deliberately ignored evidence of domestic imperialism—he argues that imperialism became deeply unfashionable in the latter half of the twentieth century. The other being an acknowledgement that the marks made by empire are not all that obvious. Porter claims that in recent years the pendulum has swung too far the other way; imperialism has become a convenient scapegoat in to explain any and all of Britain's ills.

Porter attempts to define and deconstruct the concept of imperialism and the nature of British society. He argues that the definition of imperialism is important, and there is no general agreement on what the word means. He also posits that there is no right way for imperialism to be defined. Defined usefully, imperialism did not have to greatly impact British society and culture. He argues that many features often associated with imperialism, including territorial expansion, foreign trade, and ruling other peoples, are not distinct to modern imperialism and have occurred throughout history in various contexts. He details how in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries the expansion of British economic influence lacked any significant resistance, so required little cultural support from the metropolis. The industrial revolution only further pushed Britain ahead of its neighbors in terms of colonial expansion. In the late nineteenth century, the situation drastically changed as the empire came under serious challenge and required a more wholehearted domestic commitment. Porter's central claim is that British society in this period was multicultural, with the cultures mostly determined by class. He argues that Britons rarely saw empire, why they did they scarcely took notice of it and those who did tended to critique it. Specifically, he argues that the lower classes never supported empire, and only a select few in the upper classes did.

Key Themes and Concepts:

- Enthusiasm for imperial rule was limited to select sections of the upper class
- The importance of accurately defining terms like 'imperialism' and 'colony'—there were varying degrees of control across colonies & non-colonies (ex: Egypt) making the use of the term problematic
- Need to look at the empire's impact on British society in context, not enough to look for imperial evidence without being aware of what lies around it