

Title—Empire as the Triumph of Theory: Imperialism, Information, and the Colonial Society of 1868

Author—Edward Beasley

Year—2005

Categories: Imperialism, Theory, Metropolitan Attitudes, Empire

Place: Great Britain

Time: 1840-1900

Argument Synopsis:

Beasley's book seeks to understand the rise of enthusiasm for imperialism within metropolitan Britain during the nineteenth century. Specifically, he looks at the founders of the Colonial Society of 1868 as a sample for understanding the growth of imperial sentiment in Great Britain before 1870. By looking at the founders, Beasley can reveal how particular individuals became interested in empire as a general category, and how their ideas about empire changed and grew. The founders of the Colonial Society chose to look at the big trends in the history of European contacts with non-European peoples—their thinking became imperial in scope and this process often took place before 1868.

Beasley's main focus is about the people who came to think in huge categories about the place of English-speaking democracy or the English race in world history and who came together in the Colonial Society because of their shared ideas, not because of money. According to Beasley, the desire for money explains little of the growth of the imperial ideology in the 1870s. It is hard to claim that British imperial profits were ever higher than British profits elsewhere during the mid-Victorian period, or that imperial profits were thought to be very big at all. Whatever the influence of investors on any one decision about the expansion of British power, investors as a whole did not succeed in putting together any coherent program of British territorial expansion. However, this does not mean that British colonies did not suffer financial exploitation, more than the imperial profits were not what determined the popularity of the ideology of imperialism. He notes that studying the empire as an economic phenomenon is not the same as studying the growth of the ideology of imperialism. As writers and thinkers, the founders developed their imperial ideas for intellectual rather than economic reasons.

Beasley argues that imperialism as a category became all the rage after 1868. The founders of the Colonial Society developed an imperialism of a new and more general kind, and many did this on their own as thinkers before coming together in 1868. Beasley posits that the construction of a new idea of England would occur over a span of decades. He argues that the members of the Colonial Society came in between the period of English industrialism and the twentieth century era of collectivist values. Shared amongst the founders of the Colonial Society was a general idea of British imperialism as a whole, an imperialism that covered all the settlement colonies together. To put it another way, an idea of empire so global that the particular policies or one or another colony would not shake it. He argues that before 1868 the empire had its partisans, but they did not always know or think of themselves as imperialists.

Key Themes and Concepts:

- Movements appear with apparent suddenness when some common element happens to bubble up in the lives of large numbers of people thinking in parallel about the economic, political, and intellectual substructures of their age
- Desire for money explains little of the growth of the **ideology** of imperialism in the nineteenth century
- The founders of the Colonial Society developed an imperialism of a new and more general kind