

Title—Imperialism and Popular Culture

Author—John M. MacKenzie

Year—1986

Categories: Imperialism, Metropolitan Attitudes, Culture, Media

Place: Britain (British Empire)

Time: 1870-1930

Argument Synopsis:

This essay collection is concerned with the intersection of imperialism and popular culture in Britain during the late nineteenth century through the early twentieth century. In his introduction, MacKenzie begins by noting the extreme efforts that have been by historians to discount the significance of popular imperialism in the nineteenth century. In the aftermath of decolonization, imperialism became a dirty word which nationalist historiography sought to divest itself from. The essay collection attempts to disprove the general consensus that popular imperialism was killed by the First World War. This argument hinged on the assumption that the revulsion from the nationalist militarism that produced the war led to the rejection of the imperialism with which it seemed inseparably connected. This essay collection surveys the influence of imperialism on a variety of media and leisure activities between the late nineteenth century and the end of the Second World War.

The volume is framed as a bridge between historians of imperialism and of popular culture and of propaganda. The essays are centered around these guiding questions: to what extent were popular culture elements suffused with the ideology of imperialism? How successful were popular culture vehicles in conveying an imperial world view to the British public? Were popular ideas merely a reflection of, or were they instrumental in, imperial policy? MacKenzie posits there is ample evidence to suggest that the role of Britain as a world power deriving from its imperial status continued to be projected to the British public after the First World War. All observation of the interwar years indicate the great importance of both the cinema and broadcasting in continuing the propagation of imperial themes into popular culture. These essays highlight the continuation of imperial themes in children's annuals and weekly comics, commercial packaging, school history, and geography.

The collection contains nine essays that address the fundamental questions identified in MacKenzie's introduction. In the context of the volume, imperialism refers to a generalized imperial vision rather than a sophisticated concept of empire. The essay collection aims to illustrate the distinctive character of the exchange between classes in terms of popular culture in this period. The pervasive nature of the imperial ethos in all media in Britain made the imperial world view too difficult to avoid. Many of the essays demonstrate that the imperial world view was so deeply entrenched in popular media and culture that even if formal propaganda was had limited appeal, imperialism played a central role in British popular culture through the dissolution of the empire.

Key Themes and Concepts:

- Any definition of imperialism must embrace the control and exploitation of existing empire and the communication of the justifications for that to the populace of the imperial state
- The dominant argument that the Boer War marked a moment after which enthusiasm and confidence in British imperialism is incorrect
- The central role of imperialism in all debates about culture, media, and society in this period