

Title—Ornamentalism: How the British Saw Their Empire

Author—David Cannadine

Year—2001

Categories: Metropolitan Culture, British, Empire, Colonialism

Place: Great Britain (British Empire)

Time: 1800-1960

Argument Synopsis:

Cannadine's book is primarily concerned with the varied ways in which the British understood, visualized, and imagined their empire hierarchically. Cannadine demonstrates how Britons saw themselves at the top of the scale of civilization and achievement—empire only reinforced this hierarchical view of the world, where the British occupied a preeminent place among the colonial powers. This notion of the superiority of the white/British race is an Enlightenment, and Cannadine argues that these attitudes, where social ranking was as important as skin color in contemplating the extra-metropolitan world, remained important for the British long after it had been generally supposed they ceased to matter. He points to the English in pre-Enlightenment North America not seeing the Native Americans collectively as a race of inferior savages as justification for the argument that the notion of superiority of the race is an Enlightenment concept. Cannadine attempts to reveal that the Enlightenment did not subvert the earlier individualistic way of thinking. He argues that this pre-racial way of seeing the world lasted for as long as the empire did. According to Cannadine, the British Empire has been thoroughly studied as a complex racial hierarchy, but much less scholarly attention has been paid to the empire as an equally complex social hierarchy. Specifically, he is concerned with the British empire as an imagined social entity and as a functioning social structure. He accepts the argument that nations are in part imagined communities, as said by Benedict Anderson, and asks if this is true of Britain, how much more true must it have been of the empire? Cannadine claims that the British Empire was a culturally created and imaginatively constructed artefact.

The book crafts an account of the British Empire in which the concept of hierarchy as social prestige is centered much more than in the rest of the historiography. Cannadine urges the importance of seeing and understanding the British Empire as a mechanism for the export, projection, and analogization of domestic social structures and social perceptions. He posits that individual social ordering often took precedence over collective racial othering in the empire. He concludes by discussing how traces of hierarchy linger in much of what was once the British Empire. He points to the former ruling princes of India retaining some of their wealth and status, with some remaining involved in public life, as an example of this lingering hierarchy. The monarchies that the British created or protected in much of their empire still function. The continuation of the dominions that retain the Queen as the head of state is another vestige of this empire-as-hierarchy mindset.

Key Themes and Concepts:

- The Enlightenment did not subvert the earlier individualistic analogical way of thinking that projected domestically originated perceptions of the social order overseas
- Importance of understanding the British Empire as a mechanism for the export, projection, and analogization of domestic social structures and social perceptions
- The hierarchical principle that undergirded Briton's perceptions of their empire was not exclusively based on the color-coded ranking of social groups, but also as much on the color-blind ranking of individual social prestige