

REVIEWS

The great chain which connects

David Cannadine: *Ornamentalism: How the British Saw Their Empire* (Penguin 2002)

Reviewed by **Tony Little**

Either the brute is a king, or he is a common-or-garden nigger; and if the latter, what's he doing here?'

British Liberals have always had trouble with the Empire. Indeed the Whig component of the party was partly defined by the support it gave to the American colonists in their disputes with George III in the eighteenth century. Nineteenth-century radicals such as Bright helped to build their reputation by criticising the affairs of the East India Company while even apparently belligerent Whigs like Palmerston were unenthusiastic about the expansion of Empire. Gladstone's plan for home rule in Ireland was seen as a first step in the dismantling of Empire, while Lloyd George was vilified as a traitor for his campaign against the Boer War. And yet it was Liberals who were the most conscious of the responsibilities of Empire when leaders such as Thorpe and Ashdown argued that the home country should honour its obligations to those who lived and worked under its rule.

Britain's Empire should perhaps be seen as more the consequence of European power struggles than a conscious plan of acquisition, at least up to the point of the final race for Africa and the Middle Eastern mandates

which followed the First World War. Since the Empire was never planned, it follows that there was never a complete blueprint for its control and operation. The question asked by the Prince of Wales (later Edward VII) of the Crown Prince of Germany, quoted at the top of this review, was posed to settle a question of precedence at a party for the King of Hawaii given by Lady Spencer. It ripely, if repugnantly, repudiates the simplistic view that the British Empire was about white men exploiting black (of both sexes) or the rich (in military technology) exploiting the poor.

Cannadine suggests that Britain's unusual approach to running the Empire was an amalgam of three disparate factors. Firstly, governments of all parties determined not to repeat the mistakes made in America under George III. Secondly, Britain sought to build on its own experience whereby regional and local government was in the hands of 'natural leaders' drawn from the local aristocracy and land-owning gentry. Thirdly, the British had to overcome the wide range of differences between the colonial nations – otherness – by building on what they knew and understood of their metropolitan area. The British governmental elite saw its own community as a multi-faceted and multi-layered hierarchy and projected this on to the

colonies. Cannadine identifies this concept of hierarchy as the secret of the Empire – the way Britain was able to exert effective control with so few of its own manpower resources.

The hierarchical model itself developed in three stages. In the settlement colonies of America, Australia and New Zealand, metropolitan social structures and attitudes were naturally transported to the new lands. Lessons were learnt from America and a system of social rewards and a vice-regal presence were established with aristocrats being found to take up the roles of leadership. Where true British aristocrats were unavailable, a local if sometimes phoney equivalent was encouraged. It was in these colonies that the indigenous populations suffered, sometimes grievously, but the indigenous people were relatively sparsely distributed and insufficiently numerous to offer adequate resistance to the new settlers.

In India the story was very different. The East India Company conquered India but grew beyond its trading ambitions and gradually became more and more an arm of government. The metropolitan government was more conscious of the 'otherness' of India and for a time, under Whigs such as Macaulay, it saw its mission to be one of modernising and 'civilising' the country.

The Indian Mutiny demonstrated the flaws of the hybrid government/entrepreneurial model and the East India Company vanished from the scene. The replacement model focused on 'sameness', seeing the nawabs and maharajahs as equivalent to the British monarchy and aristocracy, with the caste system as approximately equivalent to the complex English

class system. The nawabs were given responsibility and were rewarded by being integrated into the English class system. Such collaborators were subject to the advice and direction of the representatives of the British government but within this constraint they were encouraged to rule and were rewarded under the same system of honours that the crown applied to its own servants.

It was in this context that Disraeli created the title 'Empress of India' for Queen Victoria, reinforcing her position at the tip of the hierarchy. It brought the Empire to the attention of the metropolis but also made Victoria much more of a presence in India, a country she never visited. Ceremonies such as Durbars were used not only to impress the Indian multitudes with Britain's power and riches but also to show that the native rulers were an important element of Britain's ruling elite.

The Indian model formed the rough blueprint for most other colonies. A suitable group of local rulers were co-opted and given the backing of British military power, subject to British advice – advice it was unwise if not impossible to ignore. Sometimes the local tribal structure bore this burden easily, but from time to time the British had to create an artificial aristo-



cratic tradition and impose it on the colony. By the time of the Middle-Eastern mandates, which followed the 1914–18 war, the routine was so well established that the British government felt confident in creating several new monarchies out of the ruins of the Turkish Empire. One, in Jordan, still survives.

Contrary to the hesitations of leaders so diverse as Palmerston and Gladstone, Liberals of the next generation, whether as orthodox as Rosebery or as radical as Chamberlain, were enthusiasts for Empire. The Empire did not lack for Liberal pro-consuls or civilisers assuming the 'white man's burden'. But even by the time that Lloyd George's government inherited the legacy of the Ottoman Empire, the sun had begun to set on the British Empire. As it did so, the flaws of the ornamental system became clear and the difficulties inherent in empire for Liberals become explicable.

The weft and warp of ornamentalism were static and rural societies of an essentially Conservative mythology. Ornamentalism did not provide well for the ambitions of modernising urban middle classes, the constituencies from which Liberalism drew its strength in the metropolitan homeland. It was these same constituencies that Macaulay and other civilisers had sought to create in the colonies. Ornamentalism aimed to recreate the idyllic paternalist rural community that was fast decaying in England. As Cannadine puts it, 'Sir Edward Lutyens noted with pleasure and recognition, going out into "India like Africa" made him feel "very Tory and pre-Tory Feudal".' Cannadine is not primarily concerned with arguing a party case but the evidence he presents

highlights a fundamental difference between British parties of the left and right on a subject which dominated government for roughly two centuries.

It will come as no surprise to students of British history that Ireland never fully accepted ornamentalism. The full panoply of monarch's representatives, peerage, decoration and receptions was employed but never won the hearts of the majority. The dispersion of Irish and other rebels that was facilitated by the Empire's efficient communications had the effect of transferring their dissension into the settler colonies. Moreover, the success of the Irish rebellion of 1916–22 provided both a model for budding nationalist movements in the colonies and a warning to their rulers. The British like to think of the period after the Second World War as not so much the decline of Empire as the growth of Commonwealth, but Cannadine demonstrates that the Empire was not relinquished voluntarily and that the British regularly deserted their collaborators to leave the newly independent states in the hands of the modernisers who had resented ornamentalism and its beneficiaries.

The case presented by Cannadine is a useful response to the views of those who see the British Empire entirely in terms of exploitation by an overbearing racist military caste. He reminds us that the reality is more complex and that the British co-opted as well as exploited, and provided opportunities for some while repressing others. Empire brought benefits to the conquered as well as the conquerors. The book is well written and a pleasure to read but, as the section on the decline of Empire reveals, ornamentalism is only part of

the story, a part that is in danger of being lost but which is neither a complete explanation of British success nor the inevitable flaw in its design. Rather, a co-optive hierarchy was one of the tools by which

a small offshore European nation was able, for a while, to maintain an Empire on which the sun never set.

Tony Little is chair of the Liberal Democrat History Group.

'Parliament has never granted any important reform without being bullied'

Martin Pugh: *The Pankhursts* (Allen Lane, The Penguin Press, 2001; 537 pp)

Reviewed by **Sam Crooks**

Early on in this sympathetic but dispassionate biography Martin Pugh remarks that none of the Pankhursts remained long in an organisation that they did not themselves control. Emmeline was the daughter of a well-known Manchester Liberal family; her husband stood twice as a Liberal candidate. She was herself an early member of the Women's Liberal Federation, but joined the Independent Labour Party only to resign five years later; she died a Conservative candidate.

Her eldest, and favourite, daughter, Christabel, was also a member of the ILP before fighting the 1918 election as a Coupon candidate, adopting Adventism and becoming an apologist for Mussolini. Banished to Australia following a family split, Christabel's youngest sister Adela had moved across the political spectrum from the communist party to the fascist Australia First by the time of her death. Only Sylvia, a friend and lover of Keir Hardie, remained consistently on the left, rejecting the ILP in favour of a branch of the Communist Party. All four died

in straitened circumstances, dependent on the largesse of others, and only Emmeline in Britain.

Pugh covers the century from Emmeline's birth in 1858 to Sylvia's death in 1960. But the heart of his book is concerned with the thirteen years from the foundation of the Women's Social and Political Union (WSPU) in 1903 to the report of Speaker Lowther's conference in 1916 that recommended the granting of votes for women. Originating in 1867 with the National Society for Women's Suffrage, certain women had already been permitted to vote in local elections, and by 1900 the House of Commons had voted in favour of national reform on a number of occasions. But there were disputes over the exact nature of the female franchise to be granted, and in any case government time was lacking. The WSPU was born of the Pankhursts' belief that only militancy would force the government's hand.

The WSPU's early life was inauspicious – by 1905 it had only thirty members. What was to give it oxygen