

Visions of empire

*Patriotism, popular culture and the city,
1870-1939*

BRAD BEAVEN



STUDIES IN IMPERIALISM

general editor John M. MacKenzie

When the 'Studies in Imperialism' series was founded more than twenty-five years ago, emphasis was laid upon the conviction that 'imperialism as a cultural phenomenon had as significant an effect on the dominant as on the subordinate societies'. With more than ninety books published, this remains the prime concern of the series. Cross-disciplinary work has indeed appeared covering the full spectrum of cultural phenomena, as well as examining aspects of gender and sex, frontiers and law, science and the environment, language and literature, migration and patriotic societies, and much else. Moreover, the series has always wished to present comparative work on European and American imperialism, and particularly welcomes the submission of books in these areas. The fascination with imperialism, in all its aspects, shows no sign of abating, and this series will continue to lead the way in encouraging the widest possible range of studies in the field. 'Studies in Imperialism' is fully organic in its development, always seeking to be at the cutting edge, responding to the latest interests of scholars and the needs of this ever-expanding area of scholarship.

Visions of empire

MANCHESTER
1824

Manchester University Press

SELECTED TITLES AVAILABLE IN THE SERIES

THE COLONISATION OF TIME: RITUAL, ROUTINE AND RESISTANCE IN THE BRITISH EMPIRE
Giordano Nanni

WALES AND THE BRITISH OVERSEAS EMPIRE: INTERACTIONS AND INFLUENCES, 1650–1830
Huw Bowen

IMPERIAL CITIZENSHIP: EMPIRE AND THE QUESTION OF BELONGING
Daniel Gorman

*EUROPEAN EMPIRES AND THE PEOPLE: POPULAR RESPONSES TO IMPERIALISM IN FRANCE, BRITAIN,
THE NETHERLANDS, BELGIUM, GERMANY AND ITALY*
Ed. John MacKenzie

THE EMPIRE IN ONE CITY? LIVERPOOL'S INCONVENIENT IMPERIAL PAST
Ed. Sheryllynne Haggerty, Anthony Webster and Nicholas J. White

Visions of empire

PATRIOTISM, POPULAR CULTURE AND
THE CITY, 1870–1939

Brad Beaven

MANCHESTER UNIVERSITY PRESS

Manchester and New York

distributed in the United States exclusively by
Palgrave Macmillan

Copyright © Brad Beaven 2012

The right of Brad Beaven to be identified as the author of this work has been asserted by him in accordance with the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988.

Published by MANCHESTER UNIVERSITY PRESS
OXFORD ROAD, MANCHESTER M13 9NR, UK and ROOM 400, 175 FIFTH
AVENUE, NEW YORK, NY 10010, USA
www.manchesteruniversitypress.co.uk

Distributed in the United States exclusively by
PALGRAVE MACMILLAN, 175 FIFTH AVENUE, NEW YORK, NY 10010, USA

Distributed in Canada exclusively by
UBC PRESS, UNIVERSITY OF BRITISH COLUMBIA,
2029 WEST MALL, VANCOUVER, BC, CANADA V6T 1Z2

British Library Cataloguing-in-Publication Data
A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data applied for

ISBN 978 0 7190 7856 9 hardback

First published 2012

The publisher has no responsibility for the persistence or accuracy of URLs for any external or third-party internet websites referred to in this book, and does not guarantee that any content on such websites is, or will remain, accurate or appropriate.

Typeset
by Toppan Best-set Premedia Limited

This book is dedicated to my partner Becky, our sons George and Sam, and my parents Martin and Gail Beaven

CONTENTS

List of illustrations — ix

List of tables — x

Acknowledgements — xi

General editor's introduction — xii

Introduction	<i>page</i> 1
1 Cities in context: civic culture, 'New Journalism' and the creation of localised imperial identities, 1870–1939	12
2 The city and the imperial mission, 1850–1914	42
3 Civic ceremony and the citizen-soldier during the Boer War, 1899–1902	70
4 Fragmenting communities: patriotism, empire and the First World War	92
5 Educating the future citizens of empire: working-class schooling, 1870–1939	125
6 Transmitting the imperial message: Empire Day and the 1924 Wembley Exhibition	150
7 Mass entertainment, popular culture and imperial societies, 1870–1939	179
Conclusion	208

Appendix One: Principal newspapers in Portsmouth, Coventry and Leeds, c. 1800–1940 — 211

Appendix Two: A sample of theatre, music hall and cinema entertainment in Portsmouth, Coventry and Leeds, 1870–1939 — 212

References — 219

Index — 231

LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS

1	Siegfried Bettmann (1863–1951) Mayor of Coventry 1913–1914. By kind permission of the Coventry Transport Museum	98
2	The Leeds Pals recruiting Tram in 1915. By kind permission of Leeds Library and Information Services www.leodis.net	112
3	St Luke’s School was invited on to the <i>HMS Terrible</i> in 1900. By kind permission of the Portsmouth History Centre	132
4	Empire Day held in Guildhall, Portsmouth, 1912. By kind permission of the Portsmouth History Centre	154
5	A group of Sea Scouts recreate ‘Jack’ landing at the Veldt, South Africa in 1913. By kind permission of the Portsmouth History Centre	155

LIST OF TABLES

1	Occupation of Volunteer Imperial Yeomanry for Hampshire, Yorkshire and Warwickshire, 1900–2 (%)	78
2	Monthly figures of men enlisted in Portsmouth, Coventry and Leeds, August 1914–May 1915	109
3	Key dates and men enlisted in Portsmouth, Coventry and Leeds, September 1914–May 1915	111
4	Principal newspapers in Portsmouth, Coventry and Leeds, 1800–1940	211
5	Theatre and music hall entertainment in Portsmouth, March 1870–March 1939	213
6	Cinema in Portsmouth, 1911–1939	214
7	Theatre and music hall entertainment in Coventry, March 1870–March 1939	215
8	Cinema in Coventry, 1910–1939	216
9	Theatre and music hall entertainment in Leeds, March 1870–March 1939	217
10	Cinema in Leeds, 1910–1935	218

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

My thanks to John MacKenzie and the anonymous readers who commented on the original proposal and draft manuscript. Thanks also to the MUP publishing team whose professionalism is second to none.

I'm fortunate to work with a group of talented social and cultural historians whose friendship and collegiality has made working in the team such a rewarding experience. A number of colleagues (past and present) whose work overlaps with mine generously gave their time reading and commenting on drafts. Thanks to Ken Lunn for his detailed comments, Karl Bell, Rob James, James Thomas and Sue Bruley. Dave Andress, in particular, has always been happy to discuss ideas despite his heavy Faculty work load. I've also had the benefit of discussing and writing with John Griffiths, a collaborator in the field of social and cultural history for almost twenty years. John's recent research on empire and popular culture in the Antipodean colonies has proved a useful contrast.

My research has taken me principally to three city archives, and my thanks go to the staff of Coventry History Centre, Leeds Archives and Local Studies Library and the Portsmouth History Centre. I collected a wide range of material from these archives including statistical evidence that, thanks to my Dad's expertise with spreadsheets, I've been able to present in the form of charts and tables. I am grateful to Gina Harrison, who valiantly battled against the office equipment to print out the manuscript.

I have been fortunate to test my ideas out in a number of seminars and conferences including staff seminars in Winchester and Portsmouth Universities, the Urban History Conference at University of Warwick 2009 and the Social History Conference in Glasgow 2010. I am particularly grateful to Susie Steinbach and Stephen Miller for their invitation to join the 'Victorian Culture and Identity during the South African War' panel in the North American Conference on British Studies, Denver, USA, 2011.

The Centre for European and International Studies Research generously funded my research and conference attendance. I am also grateful to the Centre for funding the teaching relief I was awarded to complete the writing of the book.

Finally, my thanks to Becky my partner and our two sons George and Sam for all their love and support. Becky has, as always, been very supportive and patient while I've locked myself away in my office to write the book. While George has taken an early interest in history, I'm under no illusion that this book can ever compete with his *Horrible Histories* series. Sam's recent arrival has livened things up as his early interests have centred on grabbing anything at ground level (including the cat). George was born just before I finished my first book and Sam was born just before finishing this one. It's with some trepidation that I embark on my third book!

GENERAL EDITOR'S INTRODUCTION

A nation's cultural history is clearly made up of many local components. National and local interact in a two-way process in which the centre influences the peripheral cities, towns and villages in which the populace resides, but these localities then adapt and modify such cultural phenomena, even transmitting some aspects of their socio-cultural characteristics back to the capital. As Brad Beaven points out in this book, many of the studies of imperial culture have been top-down in their character, attempting a national focus lacking a true grounding in regional centres. Moreover, many such studies have concentrated on London and too often that great city has been seen as a synecdoche for the whole of Britain. The other problem is that the British Isles, Pocock's 'Atlantic archipelago', are in reality made up of four nations, England, Ireland, Scotland and Wales, each with its own cultural and ethnic make-up, itself complex and hard to unravel. Beaven, perhaps sensibly, has chosen to concentrate on one of these, England, and examine imperial patriotism and popular culture in three contrasting cities, Portsmouth, Coventry and Leeds, one in the south, one in the midlands, and one in the north (as it is usually regarded). In doing so, he taps into the now extensive series of studies that have emerged over the past thirty years or so while adding much local variation and detail, all dependent on the geographic location, the economic foundation and the social profile of these three places.

The roots of an imperial and patriotic culture have to be identified in a whole range of civic phenomena – in the churches, the schools, the press, the societies, the entertainment and sporting forms, the companies and other sources of employment, as well as the military and naval connections of each place. Moreover, the very fabric of British towns and cities carried expressions of civic imperialism and patriotism – in the architecture and decoration of its buildings, in its statuary, in civic ceremonies, in parades and pageants, as well as through travelling troupes of actors, bands or other entertainers. The study of all of these phenomena raises many issues of the relationships between national and local politics, of the connections with economic and commercial issues, of the local repercussions of international events, of aspects of class strife or alleged conciliation, the heightening or amelioration of social tensions. All of these are of course subjected to the dynamic of historic changes through the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, including the fever points of imperial excitements (for example in competitive conflict with other European powers), of colonial wars and of major world conflicts. Of these the Anglo-Boer of 1899-1902 and the First World War are obviously the most important.

Beaven analyses all of these with great acumen. What emerges is a highly complex picture with many local variations. While it is true that anti-imperialism seems to be a relatively muted phenomenon, the imperial dimen-

GENERAL EDITOR'S INTRODUCTION

sions of patriotism vary according to time, place and the particular social or culture medium examined. The picture that is built up is a very mixed one which reveals the essential heterogeneity of these phenomena. It may well be that the various 'factions' that have emerged in the historiography will find something to comfort them in these pages, but there is certainly no sure and simple answer to the questions posed about popular culture and its relationship with imperial patriotism. And, as Beaven himself convincingly argues, a truly national picture can be built up only through local contexts.

My own work in this field spans some thirty years of activity, while punctuated by many excursions into other areas (including environment history, Orientalism, migration and settlement studies, museums, four nations theory and much else). My original publications did indeed adopt an essentially national focus. But the realisation of the need for the local study arose with my consideration of Glasgow as an imperial city. More recently, I have been looking at aspects of imperial culture in Dundee and the manner in which these interacted with the social deprivation and labour troubles of that city. It is abundantly apparent that much more needs to be done, that we need to examine imperial and patriotic cultures in cities and towns elsewhere in England, as well as in Ireland, Scotland and Wales. The great joy of history is that the more it is explored the more do its expanses seem limitless. Beaven's study will surely help to inform and stimulate all future local studies. It is to be hoped that there will be many more of them.

John M. MacKenzie

Introduction

In the midst of the Boer War the Reverend C.G. Lang, Vicar of Portsea, organised a meeting for working men who did not usually attend church or chapel. His lecture, which was on the lessons of both municipal and national elections, was entitled 'The Imperial Instinct'. He informed his large audience, in the words of the local newspaper, that

It was a most remarkable time, because it marked the first appearance in the country of entirely new force. There had been occasions when other forces and passions had aroused the nation, but they had passed away. This time, though, they had a new force, and one which carried with it an enormous responsibility because he did not think that it would go back or pass away – that force was the Imperial instinct. There was no doubt that a great future was before this force. The country had been preparing for it during the last 300 years, ever since the great Spanish Armada.¹

For Lang, the 'imperial instinct' would soon have a distinct presence, not only at a national but also at a municipal level. His audience was left in no doubt that Portsmouth, the Empire's principal naval base, had been destined for its pivotal role in preserving and energising the Empire in a new imperial age.² Lang's recognition of how an 'imperial instinct' could flow from local institutions which had tangible meanings to a local populace has all too often been overlooked by historians who have viewed empire as a monocultural phenomenon. In presenting an imperial culture as a singular entity there is a tendency to neglect the complex layers of society through which the imperial message was transmitted and filtered. Indeed, proponents of this approach are invariably silent on the dissemination process and how it was consumed by the public at large.³ This book instead focuses on this process of dissemination of imperialism, the form it took and its consumption by those living in contrasting English cities. Analysis of

the city and its institutions provides perhaps the most consistent test of whether the urban environment acted as an effective conduit for an aggressive imperial culture, a pervasive force that had the potential to impinge upon working-people's daily urban lives between 1870 and 1939.⁴

Current historiography in the history of empire

For over twenty years the nature, impact and importance of Britain's domestic imperial culture has been the subject of intense academic debate. J.M. MacKenzie's pioneering research on the relationship between British society and the Empire encouraged a rich seam of work on the subject that was fostered by Manchester University Press's *Studies in Imperialism* series that began in the mid-1980s.⁵ This research generated an invaluable body of work that sought to illustrate the pervasive influence of empire in cultural institutions such as the theatre, music, advertising and the cinema. The launch of *Studies in Imperialism* helped initiate a vigorous debate that continues to this day on whether the consumption of this culture impacted upon individual lives during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. For example, over the past forty years historians have consistently identified the Boer War as the litmus test for popular imperialism. Richard Price's seminal monograph in 1972 challenged the orthodoxy, claiming that the popular manifestation of jingoism on the streets of Britain was largely limited to the lower and middle classes.⁶ This position of distancing working-class communities from the jingoism of the Boer War has been repeated in a number of studies, most recently by Bernard Porter and Andrew August.⁷ Significantly, both historians arrive at their conclusions through material drawn from Price's original text, despite MacKenzie's intervention in the mid-1980s that seriously questioned Price's vision of a working class disengaged with a jingoistic popular culture.⁸ However, fresh research on the domestic consequences of the Boer War has generated further scepticism that the working class exhibited apathy towards the Empire. Stephen Miller's exhaustive account of Boer War volunteers published in 2007 draws from a wide range of working-class autobiographies to argue that 'this imperial mission was inculcated in children through a variety of modes including Sunday sermons, aggressive advertisements, after school instruction, and weekend participation in any of a wide array of "paramilitary" organisation such as the Boys' Brigade'.⁹ Historians, then, have reached something of a stalemate on the success or otherwise of the imperial inculcation of popular culture. Those whose findings have identified a successful imperial hegemony in British society

INTRODUCTION

through song sheets and propaganda have difficulty in proving that the imperial messages in the music hall or schooling were consumed unquestioningly by the recipients.¹⁰ Likewise, historians who intend to absolve the working class of any noteworthy engagement with the imperial project have difficulty in accounting for the significant numbers of volunteer soldiers and the immense popularity of music hall and cinema entertainment that was immersed in imperial meaning and imagery.¹¹ What is perhaps missing here is an examination of popular culture that sustains a comparative analysis over differing urban and chronological contexts.

In recent years another strand of imperial history has challenged both the conceptual and methodological approach of historians of empire. Within the last twenty years, 'new imperial' historians have argued for a broader analysis of empire that questions the concepts of nation and identity by exploring the 'metropole and periphery' through the same analytical perspective. For historians such as Antoinette Burton, who have focused on the formulation of identity, 'Empire and nation were mutually constitutive'.¹² She challenged a tendency in "'imperial studies" to shore up the nation and re-constitute its centrality, even as the legitimacy of Great Britain's national boundaries are apparently under question'. Burton argues that such a conservative approach would run the risk 'of remaking Britain (itself a falsely homogenous whole) as the centripetal origin of empire, rather than insisting on the interdependence, the "uneven development" . . . of national/imperial formations in any given historical moment'.¹³ However, as James Thompson has pointed out, this preoccupation with the relationship between nation and empire raises important questions:

Did empire undercut or consolidate the 'nation' and for whom? Secondly, in foregrounding the relationship between 'nation' and 'empire', there is a danger of producing a monolithic, even contested, notion of the nation. New Imperial historians have examined contestation of the 'nation' in terms of gender, class and 'race' but perhaps ironically, this has sometimes served to privilege national identities and downplay region, city, town and neighbourhood.¹⁴

Certainly, by narrowing the focus to the elite networks between the metropole and the periphery, there is no sense of *how* imperialism worked in practice in Britain. Imperial hegemony is perceived as a 'given' and there is no consideration of the complexities of dissemination that were often shaped by time and place. Indeed, the decontextualisation of subject matter and the dearth of empirical evidence are fault lines that seem to run through 'new imperial' histories. In this

light, Price offered a damning analysis of the 'new imperial' history as he was struck by 'how much of the existing scholarship is far better at stating the proposition of a mutually constituted history between Britain and the empire than executing it'.¹⁵ Likewise, Andrew Thompson accused postcolonial theorists of 'failing to deconstruct the European "centre" in the way it has so successfully deconstructed the extra-European "periphery"'. Indeed, he concluded from his own research that there is 'no big theory' that underpins imperialism, 'no uniform imperial impact, no joined-up monolithic ideology of imperialism, no single source of enthusiasm or propaganda for the empire'.¹⁶

A consistent trait in 'new imperial' history is an absence of *how* empire and imperial hegemony were constructed in British culture.¹⁷ Thus we are left with little historical context or discussion on how imperial hegemony was constantly compromised and filtered through a variety of late nineteenth- and twentieth-century agencies. The lack of an empirical base from which to evaluate the influence of empire has led Bernard Porter to take issue with the notion that an imperial culture dominated society and particularly working people's lives between 1800 and 1940. He maintained that at the height of imperial fervour entrenched divisions in social class meant that there was no shared meaning of nation or empire. 'Out of separation arose a very different political culture (or cultures), with priorities and values of its own, which the imperialists were very unlikely to be able to penetrate'.¹⁸ Porter argued that the 'new imperial' history or postcolonial work in particular lacked a sensitivity to historical contexts. In short Porter accused these historians of searching for imperial events and meanings at the expense of identifying the more mundane everyday experience of living in British society during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The accusation of uneven source selection and over-generalisation could, however, be levelled at Porter himself, whose evidence for the minuscule impact of imperial popular culture is largely drawn from working-class autobiographies from a variety of industrial and urban backgrounds. Moreover, *Absent-minded Imperialists* was so concerned in dismantling an argument that it does not present a model to replace it, something that Porter later acknowledged.¹⁹

Recent research, then, on the impact of imperialism has allowed assumptions of the hegemonic power of imperialism to become embedded in analyses of the metropole-periphery relationship, while those challenging 'new imperial histories' have immersed themselves in a wealth of primary evidence drawn from multifarious sources across Britain. This book adopts a rather different perspective through inves-

INTRODUCTION

tigating how imperial ideas were disseminated through three urban communities between 1870 and 1939. It addresses recent calls to assess the social and cultural processes that went into the construction, diffusion and reception of an imperial culture in Britain.²⁰ The book focuses upon how a town's urban elite was a significant conduit of empire, while recognising that differing urban contexts were vital in shaping the imperial message in terms of its form, tone and reception in the larger community. In this sense, it is the book's intention to advance MacKenzie's recent observations that a four-nation approach to the British Empire is becoming an increasing necessity. He argues that 'simple bilateral metropole-periphery relations can no longer be sustained as a basis for analysis: empire constituted sets of multilateral relationships'.²¹ This book takes this perspective further by examining the provincial town and how imperial ideas were filtered through a range of institutions, elites and urban popular culture.

The city and empire: research parameters

Analyses of the city, its institutions and the dissemination of citizenship during this period provide perhaps the most consistent test of whether an aggressive imperial culture impinged upon working people's daily urban lives between 1870 and 1939. Indeed, Robert Colls and Richard Rodger have shown that, in themselves, cities and towns added an extra dimension to social, cultural and economic relationships.²² Historians of empire have begun to map out the way in which cities were interconnected socially, economically and politically and the part they played in an 'imperial system'.²³ Other essays have explored how imperialism imprinted indelible marks on city landscapes, architectures and cultures.²⁴ However, despite the city acting as a significant cultural conduit for dominant contemporary ideas, the relationship between the modern city, empire and its citizens has largely been neglected.²⁵ National discourse on the nature of civic life, particularly during the Edwardian period, was inevitably influenced by anxieties stemming from conditions at the heart of the British Empire. In examining the relationship between the city and empire, London, or, to put it more precisely, the East End, has dominated both contemporary and historical analysis. From the 1870s, social observers were concerned that the East End was devoid of any civic leadership and that squalid and degenerate conditions were effectively nurturing a human residuum. For imperialists, there was a danger that this social crisis would escalate into a crisis of empire in which urban 'inferior stock' would fail to compete in an era of 'national efficiency'.²⁶

Given how the East End has dominated both contemporary and subsequent historiographical accounts of the pervasive influence of imperialism, this book focuses on three communities from the south, midlands and north of England. The case studies are drawn from England, rather than Britain, since the four nations had separate relationships with empire that developed distinct ethnic and sectarian engagements with the imperial project.²⁷ The three English cities or towns – Portsmouth, Coventry and Leeds – were chosen primarily for their contrasting civic, industrial and cultural identities and differing geographical locations.²⁸ The significant physical and cultural naval presence in Portsmouth ensured that its local economy and national portrayal were bound tightly to imperial grandeur.²⁹ Alongside the naval influence, the city possessed a strong civic culture and an increasingly important skilled working-class sector employed in the Royal Dockyard. If London was the heart of empire, Portsmouth was surely the imperial flagship since the city's architecture and street furniture had an unmistakable imperial imprint.³⁰ Coventry, on the other hand, had neither an obvious imperial identity nor a strong civic culture. Between 1870 and 1939, the city emerged as an industrial boom town owing to the bicycle and car trades that employed vast armies of migrant semi-skilled workers. This was a manufacturing town at the centre of the 'new' industries producing mass-consumer goods for domestic and imperial markets. In such circumstances, working-class affluence and consumerism rather than poverty were the chief characteristics of this city.³¹ Finally, Leeds represents the older manufacturing city that was at the forefront of disseminating the civic ideal through architecture and schemes of social citizenship.³² For some historians this civic identity was immersed in an imperial culture that counteracted the divisions of class and race within Leeds.³³ The city developed rapidly through the industrial revolution and built its manufacturing base and wealth on the dress trades and mechanical engineering.³⁴ Whereas 'new' workers and 'new' industries were the key features of Coventry, Leeds's industrial background fostered more 'traditional' working-class communities.³⁵ In addition, Leeds had a greater ethnic diversity than either Portsmouth or Coventry since the city accommodated a significant Eastern European Jewish community by 1914.³⁶

These three cities drawn from the south, midlands and north exhibited contrasting civic and industrial contexts, and possessed a range of working-class communities with differing cultures and levels of affluence and poverty. Commentators and subsequent historians have linked a working-class celebration of empire to a variety of causal factors such as the cultures of skilled and conversely unskilled workers,

INTRODUCTION

the beginnings of mass consumerism, and civic and national leadership. The following chapters investigate whether, why and how an imperial culture was successfully transmitted by local and national agencies. They will explore whether we can talk of 'an imperial culture' and whether the imperial message was diffused and interpreted differently according to contrasting urban contexts.

In addressing the impact of imperialism on popular culture, this book draws on a consistent set of themes that influenced urban life between 1870 and 1939. As Simon Gunn has noted, the full consequences of urban modernity were not fully recognised until the second half of the nineteenth century when the city was reimagined through the promotion of civic culture and architecture. This book, then, investigates whether after 1870 imperial values became enmeshed with urban renewal and whether civic institutions imparted an imperial message to working communities.³⁷ In this respect, a town's civic elites' involvement in education, military recruitment and national celebrations provide an insight into the relationship between working people, the city and notions of patriotism, nation and empire. The urban elite, then, lay at the crux of the relationship between the city and Empire and so some clarification of its composition and definition is necessary.

In line with similar research on power and authority in towns during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, this book defines urban elites as those individuals, from any social background, who held leadership positions in the key institutions in the town. Rick Trainor has noted that this approach avoids a narrow focus on one particular social class and instead widens the perspective to explore how authority was exercised in Victorian society.³⁸ Those cited as an urban elite, then, will have assumed leadership roles such as councillors, guardians, school board members and JPs. Moreover, both John Garrard and Trainor established that there was considerable overlap between municipal representatives and a town's social leaders in their respective studies of northern and midland industrial towns.³⁹ Garrard discovered that Rochdale, Bolton and Salford 'were each municipally presided over by men who substantially combined political, economic and social leadership', with local manufacturers and merchants comprising the largest occupational group.⁴⁰ Likewise, Andy Croll found that those involved in Merthyr's civic project were almost exclusively drawn from the ranks of the social elite.⁴¹ This is not to assume that the urban elite was an homogeneous social grouping with clear political or ideological positions. While town councils in the late nineteenth century typically exhibited little political divide or clear political mandate, specific civic initiatives did often divide the civic elite into

'progressives' and 'economic' factions.⁴² Furthermore, by the early twentieth century, representatives of labour organisations were joining the ranks of the urban elite through election to councils and local boards.

Historians have also arrived at a broad consensus on the key periods in which there were significant shifts in the social composition of urban elites between 1830 and 1939. Garrard, and F.M.L. Thompson have noted that the upper middle class, the municipal leaders of the early nineteenth century, took flight from civic responsibilities from around the 1870s. According to Thompson, 'leadership of the work-town then passed by default to those who lived there at the time: the local builders, traders [and] shopkeepers'.⁴³ From the 1870s through to the interwar period, British local government was the stronghold of small businessmen and shopkeepers, who, in certain regions after the First World War, vied for power with an emerging labour movement.⁴⁴ This national trend resembles the composition of the urban elite in the three case study communities. While Coventry and Leeds attracted a scattering of powerful manufacturers to the Council, the urban elite in the three towns were dominated by a 'shopocracy' of small local tradesmen.⁴⁵

The urban elites' involvement and response to civic projects were further complicated by the role of the local press, which often championed the civic cause but was not slow to criticise the town's population or indeed the urban elite if they failed to embrace the civic ethos.⁴⁶ Undoubtedly, then, the press was the main conduit for the diffusion of the civic message.⁴⁷ Conversely, during this period in which there was mass education and literacy, newspapers were concerned to capture popular opinion and so the readership had some influence over newspaper coverage through published letters and their ultimate sanction – their purchasing power.⁴⁸

Themes and sources

The urban community provides the framework from which to assess the flow of imperial ideas, sentiment and propaganda. However, while urban elites were adept in disseminating their ideas through urban institutions and the local press, popular reactions and receptions to the imperial message are, of course, more difficult to fathom. However, the analysis of civic institutions, work and leisure patterns can provide an insight into the relationship between working people and empire. Provincial newspapers, trade directories and the periodical press during this period offer detailed accounts of civic and national issues, events

INTRODUCTION

and rituals. While working people were often not party to writing these accounts, their numbers and significantly *behaviour* at events such as Mafeking or Empire Day celebrations were recorded. Indeed, this book argues that, alongside a head count at civic and national celebrations, the crowd's behaviour and engagement with an event can provide a clue to the acceptance or otherwise of the imperial message. Together with the national and local press, other key sources include extant oral histories, autobiographies and contemporary literature on citizenship, empire and the urban landscape.

Finally, the book presents a consistent thematic analysis of these three urban communities through examining popular responses to empire. These themes were selected for their long historiographical pedigree and their capacity to gain an insight into how imperial ideas were filtered through an urban setting. [Chapters 1](#) and [2](#) deal with the socio-cultural and political contexts of the three urban communities and ask whether the questions raised by contemporaries about the East End's imperial decline and degeneration had any currency in the provincial towns of England. Did the shock of urban degeneration and its social-Darwinist connotations radiate from the 'Heart of Empire' or were provincial towns consumed with more pressing matters? These chapters assess the formation of civic identities and how or whether imperial ideas became enmeshed in their construction. [Chapters 3](#) and [4](#) explore the local and imperial nexus and whether imperial wars in the far reaches of the Empire were translated into tangible localised issues. Here we shall examine the role of volunteerism and patriotism through two important conflicts – the Boer War and the First World War. It is shown that the social and political turmoil of the Edwardian period placed strains on the civic project that in turn weakened working-class patriotism at both a local and an imperial level. [Chapters 5](#) and [6](#) explore the complexities of propagating an imperial message through schooling and national institutions or events such as Empire Day, public radio broadcasts and the 1924 Wembley Exhibition of Empire. Pressing local anxieties, the role of teaching staff and how national events were filtered through local elites and presented to the public are examined. Finally, [Chapter 7](#) focuses on the changing face of popular leisure between 1870 and 1939. It considers how music hall, theatre and cinema entered differing phases of engagement with the imperial message and whether societies advocating empire commanded popular support. Of crucial importance here is whether overtly imperial entertainment was absorbed by an eager audience and appropriated in more informal popular celebrations on the main thoroughfares of the three communities under consideration.

Notes

- 1 *Hampshire Telegraph*, 10 November 1900.
- 2 The navy had, by the Edwardian age, come to symbolise Britain's imperial strength; see M.A. Conley, *From Jack Tar to Union Jack. Representing Naval Manhood in the British Empire, 1870–1918* (Manchester, Manchester University Press, 2009), ch. 1.
- 3 See my analysis of the 'new imperial' history below.
- 4 R. Colls and R. Rodger, *Cities of Ideas: Civil Society and Urban Governance in Britain 1800–2000. Essays in Honour of David Reader* (Aldershot, Ashgate, 2004), p. 1.
- 5 J.M. MacKenzie, *Propaganda and Empire* (Manchester, Manchester University Press, 1986); J.M MacKenzie (ed.), *Imperialism and Popular Culture* (Manchester, Manchester University Press, 1984); C. Hall (ed.), *Cultures of Empire. Colonizers in Britain and the Empire in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries: A Reader* (Manchester, Manchester University Press, 2000); J. Richards, *Imperialism and Music. Britain 1876–1953* (Manchester, Manchester University Press, 2001).
- 6 R. Price, *An Imperial War and the British Working Class. Working-class Attitudes and Reactions to the Boer War* (London, Routledge, 1972), p. 216.
- 7 B. Porter, *Absent Minded Imperialists. Empire, Society and Culture in Britain* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2004, 2006 edn), p. 216; A. August, *The British Working Class 1832–1940* (Harlow, Longman, 2007), p. 151.
- 8 MacKenzie, *Propaganda and Empire*, pp. 61–2.
- 9 S.M. Miller, *Volunteers on the Veld. Britain's Citizen Soldiers and the South African War, 1899–1902* (Norman, Oklahoma Press, 2007), p. 22.
- 10 Richards, *Imperialism and Music*.
- 11 Price, *An Imperial War and the British Working Class*.
- 12 E. Said, *Culture and Imperialism* (London, Vintage, 1993). See for example, G. Russell, 'Entertainment of Oddities', in K. Wilson (ed.), *A New Imperial History: Culture, Identity and Modernity in Britain and Empire 1660–1849* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2004), pp. 48–70.
- 13 A. Burton, 'Who Needs Nation? Interrogating "British" History', *Journal of Historical Sociology*, 10, 3, September 1997, pp. 229, 231.
- 14 J. Thompson, 'Modern Britain and the New Imperial History', *History Compass*, 5, 2, 2007, p. 459.
- 15 R. Price, 'One Big Thing: Britain, Its Empire and Their Imperial Culture', *Journal of British Studies*, 45, July 2006, p. 603.
- 16 A. Thompson, *The Empire Strikes Back? The Impact of Imperialism on Britain from the Mid-nineteenth Century* (Harlow, Longman, 2005), pp. 241–2.
- 17 Price, 'One Big Thing: Britain, Its Empire and Their Imperial Culture', p. 610.
- 18 Porter, *Absent minded Imperialists*, p. 224.
- 19 B. Porter, 'Further Thoughts on Imperial Absent Mindedness', *Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History*, 36, 1, March 2008, p. 103.
- 20 Quoted in Porter, 'Further Thoughts on Imperial Absent Mindedness', p. 110.
- 21 J.M. MacKenzie, 'Irish, Scottish, Welsh and English Worlds? A Four-nation Approach to the History of the British Empire', *History Compass*, 6, 5, 2008, p. 1224.
- 22 It has been shown that cities and towns themselves added an extra dimension to social and economic relationships; see Colls and Rodger, *Cities of Ideas*, p. 1.
- 23 S. Haggerty, A. Webster and N.J. White (eds), *Empire in One City? Liverpool's Inconvenient Imperial Past* (Manchester, Manchester University Press, 2008).
- 24 F. Driver and D. Gilbert (ed.), *Imperial Cities* (Manchester, Manchester University Press, 2003).
- 25 Driver and Gilbert, *Imperial Cities*, p. 4.
- 26 To some extent this contemporary view has been taken up uncritically by subsequent historians; see M. Brodie, *Politics of the Poor: The East End of London 1885–1914* (Oxford, Clarendon Press, 2004).