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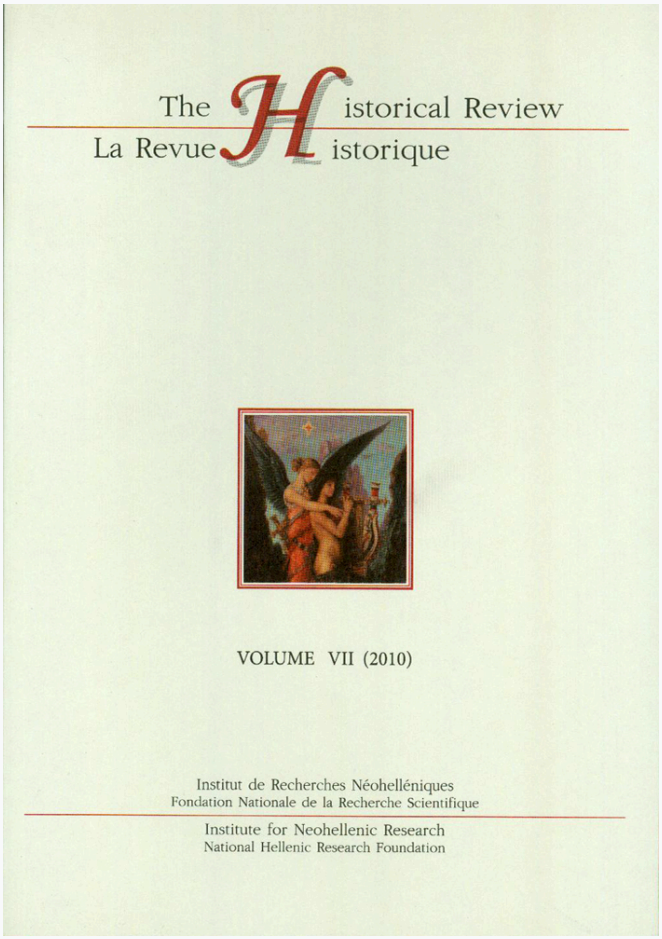

Paul Kléber Monod, Imperial Island: A History of Britain and its Empire,1660-1837

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Critical Perspectives

Approches Critiques

Paul Kléber Monod,
IMPERIAL ISLAND: A HISTORY OF BRITAIN AND ITS EMPIRE, 1660-1837,
Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009, 448 pages.

Paul Kléber Monod's most recent book, *Imperial Island: A History of Britain and its Empire, 1660-1837,* falls within the historical context of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century imperial Britain. The book is part of the historiography dealing with imperial Britain, a historiography reinvigorated during the past decade, driven by such scholars as Niall Ferguson, David Armitage, Simon Schama, David Cannadine, Felipe Fernández-Armesto, P. J. Cain, A. G. Hopkins and Jorge Cañizares-Esguerra, to name but a few. Monod's objective was to write a book about Britain's imperial path during the period of the "long eighteenth century", in other words a history of Britain from the Stuart Restoration of 1660 to its emergence as a dominant global superpower in the first half of the nineteenth century, during the reign of Queen Victoria.

The writer chose to present a strict political narrative of British history, while addressing the rapidly evolving environmental factors, cultural issues and gender relations taking place in Britain as it carved out its empire. The result is a comprehensive and sweeping account of Britain's expansion and the transformative role that Empire played throughout its global territories. This approach derives from Monod's belief that narrative history retains a strong appeal as a path to historical understanding, especially for students and readers who possess only the slightest understanding of the early modern period of the British Empire. The book is organized in seven thematic parts, set within a clear, chronological framework, includes illustrations and maps to help orient the reader and concludes with a selected bibliography divided by subject.

Monod begins his narration in a Braudelian mode, describing the British archipelago during the seventeenth century, emphasizing its farming and industry, its towns and villages, its population, social ranking and culture. Furthermore, Monod aims to remind the reader that the formation of the English state and of the first English Empire was the result of a process, the origins of which date back to the Tudor period (1485-1603) and the reign of

Henry VIII and his Protestant reformations. However, Monod states that it was under the House of Stuart and the reign of James VI of Scotland and I of England (1603-1625) that the first global English, or British, Empire was born; an empire based on English superiority within Britain, as well as on England's global importance as the new political centre and commercial hub of an expanding empire spreading from Newfoundland and Barbados to India and Japan. For Monod, the most important feature of this new era was that the empire and the state were linked by a new patriotic zeal, in an effort not only to protect expanding British commercial and imperial interests all over the world, but also to defeat Britain's traditional Catholic enemies, mainly Spain and France.

The most appropriate figures to personify this patriotic zeal were King George III and Prime Minister William Pitt the Elder. Both of them generated the concept of "Britons" or "British public", which was perceived as being made up of independent country gentlemen, middle-class men, artisans, tradesmen and shopkeepers. This new era of British history is also combined with the fall of the old system of political control established by the "Junto Whigs" after the Glorious Revolution (1688), while in the place of the latter new ideologies were emerging, based less on the defence of Protestantism than on patriotic attachment to the state. However, according to Monod, one consequence of the insistence on British patriotism and of the decline of the Whigs was that George III governed through hand-picked ministers, a development regarded as a reversal of the hard-won concessions of the Glorious Revolution. Furthermore, the American crisis tested the power of the British parliament and forced Britons and Americans to think about the real meaning of liberty, while Britain experienced governmental crises, riots in the streets and, finally, the loss of its American colonies. Yet, Monod reminds us of the economic benefits of British power, evident in the transformation of rural and metropolitan England, and of the emergence of the Enlightenment, whose major figures used the grist of Empire to fashion more durable concepts of rights and liberty.

The loss of America is seen by Monod as the event defining the transition between the "first" and "second" British Empires, in which Britain shifted its attention away from the Americas to Asia, the Pacific and Africa. During the years following the loss of the American colonies until the end of the Napoleonic Wars, the British state was set on a more conservative path, which it maintained for 50 years. The preservation of order at home and the

extension of order into the expanding empire became the chief priorities of British conservative governments. Now, the concept of order was broader and stricter, and it encompassed social as well as political stability – and swift measures against those who threatened it. For Monod, the loss of America and the French Revolution horrified the conservatives by raising the possibility of republicanism and democracy in Britain. Therefore, the doctrine of resistance to the monarch in defence of constitutional rights was now replaced among conservatives by a conviction that Britain was a nation where violent political upheavals were absolutely unnecessary.

According to Monod, the period after the end of the Napoleonic Wars signalled the beginning of a "New Order". By 1815 the British goals to protect order at home and the Protestant Succession and to defeat France, goals set after the Glorious Revolution, had been achieved. However, large segments of Britons were demanding changes leading to a restraint of the state's conservative character. As a result the state began to accommodate itself to new social and economic realities, especially industrialization and the enhanced economic clout of the middle class. After 1827, piecemeal change was overwhelmed by a flood of innovation. A reformed British state emerged, based on the principle that active reforms could have beneficial consequences in addressing social issues, as well as in maintaining governmental stability. The "New State" reflected "a social system in which the old, fixed hierarchy of orders seemed to have given way to a new, more volatile social structure based on the concept of class". This new era of British history is known as Britain's "imperial century"; a new era in which Britain, unchallenged at sea, adopted the role of global policeman, a state of affairs later known as the "Pax Britannica", and a foreign policy of "splendid isolation". The island story was now a global epic.

The chief strength of this book is that it presents with clarity and concision the vigorous, messy, complexity of "long eighteenth-century" Britain. However, the fact that Monod's book has been designed for use in the undergraduate classroom, in a strict narrative form, may lead some readers to reject it; that is, readers wishing they had learnt more of the creation of the formal or informal British Empire; of the indigenous peoples of the British imperial world; of those who laboured in its fields and plantations; or of the social and economic development of the empire. Yet, the extensive bibliography allows any demanding reader to fill in the remaining gaps.

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