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Review

Brett M. Bennett and Joseph M. Hodge (Eds), *Science and Empire: Knowledge and Networks of Science across the British Empire, 1800–1970*. Basingstoke, Palgrave Macmillan, 2011, xvii + 346 pages, hardcover.

This successful book is the second in Palgrave Macmillan's new 'Britain and the world' series under the editorship of the British Scholar Society. Forthcoming titles include many which will interest readers of this journal and which come, as does the volume under review, from the flourishing group of scholars working under and with William Roger Louis of the University of Texas at Austin, who is the dedicatee of this volume, on the editorial board of the series, and the formative influence on many of the contributors to this volume. In recent years the group has included many scholars who consciously adopt geographical methods of analysing empire – here the concept of networks – to understand how people, material objects, ideas, techniques, and ideologies circulated in imperial lands and institutions. This way of analysing empire considers geography not as a product of other forces, but as constitutive of the practices of empire and of the interaction of imperial with local knowledges and practices. Geographers have done much to further this way of thinking about empire: Alan Lester's and David Lambert's work has been particularly important, while David Livingstone's and Charlie Withers's work on geographies of science has shown us how universalist ideas of science creak when their local manifestations are considered. This volume takes ideas of imperial networking further in three ways: by extending analysis into the decolonising and postcolonial periods (up to 1970); by considering a particularly broad range of locales; and by analysing these ideas in widely differing scientific specialisms.

The work starts with an historiographic overview by Joseph Hodge which is a particularly useful introduction not only to this book but to successive ways in which imperial core–periphery relationships have been conceptualised. With its useful bibliography, it will rapidly find its way onto reading lists as an accessible yet nuanced and authoritative historiographic introduction. It describes how modernising paradigms of a progressive metropole sending out scientific experts to improve a backward and dependent periphery were challenged by subaltern authors who saw scientists and science itself as tools of colonial violence, notwithstanding the alleged neutrality of their methods, practitioners, and rhetoric – a paradigm which has in turn given way to the present focus on imperial networks which challenges the binary of metropole and colony and explores the contingent and hybrid knowledges and practices of networked imperial science and the mobile life paths of its personnel. This fine overview is followed by a complementary chapter by the other co-editor which brings the focus on to the British Empire in particular and which introduces the case studies which follow. There are five of these from the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries (that is, from the colonial period) and a further seven from the 'end of empire', a more loosely defined period. The geographical areas covered range from India through Africa to Australia and Antarctica, the last perhaps stretching the concept of the British empire most boldly. In terms of topic the case studies reach as far as psychiatry, but the best covered field is resource management, namely forestry, agriculture, and fisheries. In a book distinguished by engaging, well researched, and coherent chapters I most enjoyed those by Gregory Barton on imperial composting; Joseph Hodge on the agricultural expert and the challenges to improvement schemes based on mechanisation and artificial fertilisers by those of the 'humus school' and lower tech practices working along the grain of the local habitats; and Sabine Clarke on the making of the Colonial Research Service – an intended cadre of high flying experts trained in the metropolis who would parachute in to sort out scientific problems of the empire – only to be grounded for reasons as prosaic as poor pension arrangements.

The book ends not with a conclusion but with an epilogue by Mark Worboys which, in a volume which emphasises the hybridity of knowledges in imperial spaces, is itself something of a hybrid. Structurally it might have sat better at the start of the volume as it was part review of the literature with a scope rather broader than that of Hodges, part summary of selected chapters, and part evaluation of the place of studies of science and empire within the history of science as a whole. It acclaims with justification the innovative nature of the subfield of science and empire, and suggests that its marginalisation within the history of science may be due, interestingly, to its strong empirical focus and lack of reliance on fashionable theory; to the fact that it looks outwards to science in society rather than inwards to the society of science; and to the fact that it focuses on gritty (and nicely geographical) subdisciplines, such as forestry and agriculture, which command less attention within the history of science than do 'pure' sciences. This enjoyable and incisive contribution did not wholly compensate for the lack of real conclusion whose absence is the more striking because of the very good introductory matter. It would not have laboured the point to have had a conclusion which summarised the insights which the networked approach had permitted and pointed out what would have been lost had a rigid metropole–periphery binary been presupposed. Some speculations on what would be the next steps in the history of science and empire would have been similarly welcome: Mark Worboys does touch on this when he reviews some 'big picture' assessments, but it would have been good to have some reflection on what a 'big picture' might look like in a subfield predicated on detailed analysis of the small picture and its distinctive local features.

All in all this is a very good book and it is interesting to see geography represented in it – not just in the inherently

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geographical approach, but in the literature cited, the disciplinary affiliations of the contributors, and the fact that various contributors draw attention to their *Journal of Historical Geography* publications. This book can be recommended to all students of the history and geography of empire and science, and its accessible style and engaging presentation will ensure that it can be useful to students and scholars of all levels of experience.

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