Making Empire Visible or Making Colonialism Visible? The Struggle for the British Imperial Past

Angela Woollacott

British Empire history is a scholarly field with considerable genealogy and longevity, certainly in comparison to the historiographies of other modern empires. However, despite this long history, the frameworks within which this historiography has considered the formation, significance and implications of the empire have been limited. The dominant historiographical interpretation has either accepted the empire as a political and economic past to be studied but not interrogated, or has exhibited nostalgia for Britain's lost imperial greatness. Since the dramatic reinvigoration of the field in recent years by new approaches, such as postcolonial and feminist theories, historians of Britain and its empire now hold radically competing visions. Much of the new scholarship identifies the British Isles themselves as a site of the empire, asserting the metropole's implication in aspects of imperial history from slavery, to Orientalist and racial thinking, to colonial hierarchies. Other historians reject contentions that the empire was a part of British metropolitan history, seeing instead a separation between "home" and "away," and emphasizing positive legacies of the empire—an insistence that has provoked charges of nostalgia. This historiographical debate, labelled by Catherine Hall as Britain's own version of the "history wars,"¹ has played out in monographs,

Angela Woollacott is Professor of Modern History at Macquarie University. Her books include *On Her Their Lives Depend: Munitions Workers in the Great War* (University of California Press, 1994); *To Try Her Fortune in London: Australian Women, Colonialism and Modernity* (Oxford University Press, 2001); and *Gender and Empire* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2006). She is currently completing a book manuscript on three iconic "Australian" women performers of the early 20th century whose careers fused modernity and racial ambiguity; and beginning an Australian Research Council-funded project on gender, culture and political change from the 1830s to the 1860s, placing Australian settler colonialism in imperial context. Her email is: angela.woollacott@mq.edu.au.

1 Catherine Hall, "Book Review Forum," *Victorian Studies* 45, no. 4 (2003), p. 724.

book reviews, journal articles, and museum exhibitions.

In this paper I assess aspects of this historiographical debate and consider the differing implications of approaches that make empire more historically visible versus those that make colonialism visible through representation and analysis in both scholarly and public forums. While it is the case that Britain has long accepted the empire as linked to its national history, that acceptance has been fraught by debates over the nature and legacies of British imperialism—a debate with clear significance for issues of equality and racial inclusion in Britain today. What I want to suggest is that making empire visible in metropolitan histories *can* be a relatively safe and easy process. Making colonialism and its historical import and legacies visible as part of the metropolitan past, on the other hand, can be quite a different undertaking, with much higher stakes.

While this distinction between imperial history and the history of colonialism – that is, of the actual regimes of British conquest and rule in the multiple sites of the empire – is politically significant, it is obviously complicated in relation to historiography. It raises a question as to the place of other extant fields of historiography within such bifurcated groupings. For example, Native American history in the United States and Aboriginal history in Australia are both fields with solid track records and bodies of scholarship. Both analyse colonialism within these settler-national histories, and of course need to be seen as evidence of recognition of internal empires. Yet fields of study of internal empire and colonialism have often been dissociated from the study of empire beyond or transcending colonial or national borders. Processes that were intimately linked historically have often been treated as separate fields historiographically. This has been true for a range of empires in the modern period, not just the British Empire.

In this essay I seek to ground my argument about the difference between “making empire visible” and “making colonialism visible” in two sets of comparison. One is a comparison of two scholarly journals—a more established British journal and a newer American-based journal. The other comparison is between two new museums in Britain that have set out to present the history of the empire to the public: the British Empire and Commonwealth Museum in Bristol, and the International Slavery Museum in Liverpool.

Firstly, then, one way to view these different interpretations is to consider broad differences in approach between the two major journals that have addressed themselves to British empire history, *The Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History* (JICH) and the *Journal of Colonialism and Colonial History* (JCCIH). The JICH currently describes itself as giving particular attention “to imperial policy and rivalries; colonial rule and local response; the rise of nationalism; the process of decolonization and the transfer of power and institutions; the evolution of

the Imperial and Commonwealth association in general; and the expansion and transformation of British culture."² A quick glance through back volumes of the *JICH* confirms the impression that its interests have lain in political, administrative and economic history, its perspective has been dominantly a metropolitan one, and most of its authors and editorial board members have been men (although their ethnicities and nationalities are not determinable from the tables of contents).

Yet there are ways in which the *JICH* defies simple categorization. It has not ignored issues of race; indeed, its inaugural volume in October 1972 includes a review of a book on race relations in India and East Africa, and the lead article in the May 1973 issue is a study of "Attitudes and Policies towards the Non-White Residents of the British Empire of Settlement."³ Studies of sexuality have appeared in its pages, even if the most noteworthy are the 1986 articles by Ronald Hyam that feminist historians have criticized for their masculinist and elitist perspective and the absence of analysis of the power relations enacted in sexual encounters.⁴ Class analysis has been represented, and popular culture has also been part of the journal's purview, with the first issue carrying an article reviewing a BBC television series on the history of the British Empire.⁵

Thus it is not that the journal has neglected the areas of social and cultural history in some wholesale fashion (though women's and gender history have not been among its special interests). Rather, the issue is more a matter of political and analytical stance toward the empire itself, and toward the processes of imperialism and colonialism. Many of the articles that the *JICH* has published have adopted the perspectives of imperial rulers and beneficiaries and have been at least indifferent towards the fate or histories of the colonized. It has printed what can only be described as pro-imperial viewpoints, if not actually glowing defences of the empire's historical import and legacies. One example of imperial nostalgia from the first issue runs:

Love it or loathe it, the British Empire did at least have grandeur.

² Brochure advertising History journals published by Routledge (Taylor & Francis Group), early 2008.

³ Robert A. Huttenback, "No Strangers within the Gates: Attitudes and Policies towards the Non-White Residents of the British Empire of Settlement," *The Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History* 1, no. 3 (1973), pp. 271-302.

⁴ Ronald Hyam, "Empire and Sexual Opportunity," *The Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History* 14, no. 2 (1986), pp. 34-90; and "Concubinage and the Colonial Service: The Crewe Circular (1909)," *The Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History* 14, no. 3 (1986), pp. 170-186.

⁵ James Morris, "Popularisation of Imperial History: The Empire on Television," *The Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History* 1, no. 1 (1972), pp. 113-18.

Its style was terrific, its aspirations were immense, men died happily in its service or made great fortunes from its pickings. Pathos and disillusion haunted it. Humour and dash enlivened it.... Grown men cried in its heyday, to envisage the flag flying over tundra and coral reef, and they were not all boobies; the idea of the Pax Britannica contained seeds of true nobility, and could rightly move men to tears of pride or imagination.⁶

This passionate defence of the empire is perhaps at an extreme end of the *JICH*'s tone, but there is very little representing the other, more critical end of the spectrum. Biographical approaches lauding great (mostly British) men have been a mainstay in the journal, both in terms of historical figures and those celebrated as historians important to the field.

New approaches to the empire began to make an appearance in the journal by the mid 1990s, particularly in the book review section. Topics such as travel, women's history, labour history, and even the violent repression of colonial revolt began to be represented. This development, however, showed not so much that the journal had changed dramatically, but rather that the field was changing. "The new imperial history" was bursting on the scene, despite the limited number of outlets for it. Since then, the *JICH* has published something of a mixture, largely adhering to its traditional preference for political, administrative and economic history, but with a minor infusion of other topics, such as immigration restriction, the monarchy, and even some cultural historical analyses of imperial associations and rituals. In recent years, the launch of another journal focussed on empires and imperialism, as well as the colonialism of its title, has meant that the *JICH* has been able to retain much of its long-standing character despite the enormous growth of postcolonial and other new approaches to imperial studies.

The *Journal of Colonialism and Colonial History (JCCH)* appeared in the year 2000. One of the differences between the two journals, of course, is that the *JICH* is edited in Britain (where it has had a long attachment to the University of London), whereas the *JCCH* is edited in the United States, a fact that is not lost on some contenders in this debate. One staunch defender of the empire's reputation, David Gilmour, avowedly "rejects the view of some revisionist historians, principally across the Atlantic."⁷ Elsewhere, Gilmour scolds "a young American historian" for daring to contend that the legacies of the long historical connection between Britain and India ought to figure in contemporary political debate—calling this suggestion

⁶ Morris, "Popularisation of Imperial History," p. 118.

⁷ Geoffrey Moorhouse, "The old scenes shall rise again....," Review, *The Guardian*, 1 October 2005, p. 9.

"rather patronizing advice."⁸ This dismissal of "young American historians" is consonant with wider rejections of proponents of "the new imperial history" as impressionable, foolish and misguided. The view that revisionist histories of empire are only being written in America is, of course, mistaken; there are practitioners in Britain as well as multiple other locations. It is the case, though, that the *JCCH* has published a higher percentage of women authors than the *JICH* and regards feminist and postcolonial histories as part of its purview.

As is indicated by its title, the *JCCH* does not limit itself to the British Empire, but takes colonialism and its history around the globe for its subject matter. Articles have focussed on places ranging from Africa, to the Dutch East Indies, the Ottoman Empire, China, North America, and Latin America—global history indeed. Topical and thematic approaches range from the history of sexuality, to religious history, environmental history, history of medicine, and political history. What lends coherence to the journal are shared interests in the operation of colonialism—its ideologies, political and social processes, cultural manifestations, and points of friction and rupture. Themes that unite journal articles across wide geographical spans include slavery (and challenges to it), conflicts over land, racial hierarchies and policies, gender, nationalisms, and methodological issues such as those concerning finding the voices of the colonized. Methodological and theoretical questions occur much more frequently in its pages than they do in the pages of the *JICH*; such questions bring together historians otherwise separated by place, time period or both, as well as offering reflections on historical practice.

For historians of the British Empire, the *JCCH* offers the benefit of research and methodologies applied to diverse sites and periods of colonialism, thus enabling a sharper analysis of their own subjects. Having a wider comprehension of imperialism and colonialism as forces in global history provides context to British imperial histories, and insight into their particularities. The journal also offers a wider audience for authors of articles on the British Empire. As Paul Kramer and John Plotz argue in the introduction to the 2001 special issue they coedited, comparing the British and American empires between 1857 and 1947:

Divided up by area studies and language, the apparatus with which scholars approach imperialism tends to leave each empire freestanding. Too often, the dyad of metropole and colony overpowers analysis of how empires were entangled with each other in literary, imaginative, social, political, military, and economic interactions... Empires were rivals for territory and commerce;

8 David Gilmour, "Calcutta in the Cotswolds," *London Review of Books*, 3 March 2005, p. 15.

they formed diplomatic as well as cultural alliances; they traded and adapted models of rule; they imagined their own histories as empires and nonempires with templates borrowed from others.⁹

By reading and comparing *across* empires, scholars may hone their understanding and analysis of how imperialism and colonialism were understood by those on both sides of colonial power, in any period.

The point of such analysis is not to celebrate, commemorate or even just to record the history of one particular empire (the British or any other), but to apprehend colonialism systematically—its workings, effects and legacies. It is easy to see why some scholars prefer *not* to focus on the meanings and effects of colonialism. As Fiona Paisley has argued, grappling with colonialism can mean questioning the nature and accuracy of archival records, which in turn has implications for national histories. The stakes are particularly high for settler colonies, “where reimagining the nation entails conceptualising nation, empire and colonisation in tandem,” but such a line of thinking also destabilizes the nation in other imperial locations.¹⁰ The issue of attachment to national histories, as opposed to a willingness to scrutinize them, lies at the heart of the difference between making empire visible versus making colonialism visible.

Another lens through which to view these issues and debates in Britain is that of recent additions to Britain’s museums. According to a January 2008 article in *The Guardian*, the British government has entertained a recent proposal put forward by the Tory Lord Baker for a new National Museum of British History. In the view of the journalist, Baker’s conception of the history to be represented is a “golden-thread view of English liberties and ‘what we have given to the world over the centuries’” with “no sense of the struggles littering our past,” rather “an institutionalised British story—of Glorious Revolutions, Churchillian ardour and the empire (for which, predictably, ‘we should stop apologising’).”¹¹ Whatever comes of this particular proposal, there are two new museums on the national landscape which both seek to address the history of the empire directly.

One is the International Slavery Museum which opened in Liverpool on

9 Paul Kramer and John Plotz, “Pairing Empires: Britain and the United States, 1857–1947,” Introduction to special issue, *Journal of Colonialism and Colonial History* 2, no. 1 (2001), p. 4.

10 Fiona Paisley, “White Settler Colonialisms and the Colonial Turn: An Australian Perspective,” Introduction to special issue, *Journal of Colonialism and Colonial History* 4, no. 3 (2003), p. 5. Also on this issue, see Antoinette Burton, “Who needs the nation? Interrogating ‘British’ history,” Ch. 6 in Catherine Hall (ed.), *Cultures of Empire: Colonizers in Britain and the Empire in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries: A Reader* (New York, 2000).

11 Tristram Hunt, “A museum of back-slapping will belittle our island story,” *The Guardian*, 15 January 2008.

August 23, 2007, marking the bicentenary of the abolition of the British slave trade. The museum is located at Albert Dock, close to where, in the eighteenth century, ships of the slave trade were repaired and fitted for their terrible journeys. Historian Marcus Rediker credits this new museum with "opening up the slave trade to the world of [the] museum-going public."¹² It is perhaps a remarkable museum, and its director David Fleming claimed in his opening speech that it is the most important new museum in Britain in a century. He stated further that:

this is a museum with a mission. We wish to help counter the disease of racism, and at the heart of the museum is a rage which will not be quieted while racists walk the streets of our cities, and while many people in Africa, the Caribbean, and elsewhere, continue to subsist in a state of chronic poverty. This is not a museum that could be described as a "neutral space" – it is a place of commitment, controversy, honesty, and campaigning.¹³

An admiring review in *The New York Times* described the new museum's galleries, which include representations of the culture and daily life of West Africa, the Middle Passage, runaway slaves being hunted, and a Ku Klux Klan robe—but the review also noted in passing that the museum is "compact."¹⁴

Perhaps less compact is the British Empire and Commonwealth Museum in Bristol, which occupies three floors of a landmark early Victorian building, the old Bristol railway station designed and built by the famous engineer Isambard Kingdom Brunel. Opened in October 2002, the Museum plans to move to London soon in an effort to gain greater attendance and support, though it has done well in its more than six years of existence, winning several heritage and tourism awards, and being shortlisted for others. It has amassed a collection of around 75,000 objects, including artefacts, photographs and films, including home films taken around the empire. In contrast to the International Slavery Museum, the Empire and Commonwealth Museum sees much in imperial history to celebrate. It lays great stress on the size and supposed importance of the current British Commonwealth of Nations, with a whole display gallery devoted to it. The cultural diversity and

12 Marcus Rediker, Lecture on "The Floating Dungeon: The History of the Slave Ship," 31 October 2007, hosted by the International Slavery Museum; quote from the lecture transcript on the website of the Museum.

13 David Fleming, from the transcript of his speech given at the gala dinner celebrating the opening of the International Slavery Museum, 22 August 2007, from the website of the International Slavery Museum.

14 Jane Perlez, "A New Museum is Frank in Its Exploration of the Slave-Trading Past," *The New York Times*, 22 August 2007.

comity of the Commonwealth of Nations are presented as signal products of the empire, along with explanations of what is termed "the Commonwealth ideal."

Illustrative of the general tone, the museum's website overview of the nineteenth-century section provides the following outline: "How did Britain's empire work? And who benefited from it? These galleries tell the story of the Victorian empire... how Britain expanded and controlled its empire; who left Britain to live or work abroad; and what it felt like to live under British rule." Admittedly, the museum's displays and publications are pitched at a school-age audience and the level of historical analysis reflects this pragmatic approach. However, the museum's galleries reflect curatorial choices, such as the relatively brief display on the history of British slavery and the slave trade, compared to the larger space devoted to the story of the *abolition* of slavery. The section on convict transportation to Australia reflects a simplified version of convict history, with emphasis placed on the prospects the Australian colonies offered to emancipees for self-improvement. The overall message of the museum combines an advocacy of historical education with an emphasis on the positive aspects of imperial history, and its contemporary legacies.¹⁵

The British Empire and Commonwealth Museum clearly promotes public awareness of imperial history; that is, it is making the empire visible. And it places some emphasis on diversity. But unlike the International Slavery Museum, changing the status quo does not seem to be part of its brief, nor does the kind of critical awareness that would draw attention to the systematic workings of racism or colonialism. Perhaps the Bristol museum feels constrained by concern about what would be palatable to the public; and I should point out that it is largely financially reliant on voluntary visitors, school groups, and donations.

In December 2005, a commentator in *The Guardian* contended that Britain was less prepared to deal with its burdens of history than Turkey. In Turkey, George Monbiot argued, mentioning the Armenian genocide in the First World War will attract prosecution and persecution. In Britain, neither of these fates would be heaped upon someone who referred to "atrocities" in the historical record, because there is no public recognition that there *were* instances of "atrocities" in British empire history. Despite recent books documenting them, the British general public has no awareness of the millions who died in India in late nineteenth-century famines induced by the colonial government; or the confinement, torture and killing of large numbers of Kikuyu people in 1950s Kenya during the suppression of anti-

¹⁵ My assessment of the British Empire and Commonwealth Museum is based on my visit there in September 2005; its publications such as its newsletter, particularly No. 23 Summer/Autumn 2005, and its education service magazine *Empire and Us* detailing its education programme for 2005-06; and its website.

colonial nationalism.¹⁶ The documented details of such ghastly parts of the imperial record have not sunk into a British public consciousness made impervious by a long tradition of belief that the empire was a benevolent enterprise that benefited the benighted colonized. David Gilmour, for example, whips the "postcolonial historians" who allow "no room for altruism" in their accounts, who take it "for granted that colonial rule was always evil and colonialist motives always bad," and who "compete with each other to find more extreme ways of expressing their opprobrium." Their work, he claims, ignores "the evidence of benign motives—as there is in the letters and diaries of hundreds of civil servants who spent their careers in India."¹⁷

In their introduction to a recent volume on the empire and metropolitan culture, Catherine Hall and Sonya Rose argue that the empire was a constant presence on the political agenda in Britain from the 1770s onwards, and that what fluctuated over time was not its presence but its visibility. While the empire was present and intact until the 1940s, from the 1950s the issue became its decomposition; the postwar West Indian and South Asian migrants were seen as separate from imperial history. It was only from the 1980s that a postcolonial critique emerged that connected neo-colonialism, colonial histories and contemporary British culture, not least because of racism and anti-racist protest.¹⁸ Thus the visibility of the empire is not a novelty in Britain, but rather a political artefact that has waxed and waned. Indeed the very venerability of imperial visibility has enabled a historiography of the empire that has accepted or even celebrated its political import. Making colonialism visible, on the other hand, while it too can claim antecedents, is on the whole a more recent and thornier matter.

While scholars such as Amy Kaplan are interrogating nostalgia for empire in contemporary American culture, several scholars have commented on the Raj nostalgia that saturated British popular culture in the 1970s and 1980s. In 2003 Jon Wilson noted:

The last great empire boom occurred during the late 1970s and early 1980s when the televising of Paul Scott's 'The Jewel in the Crown' and David Lean's film of 'A Passage to India' evoked a

¹⁶ George Monbiot, "The Turks haven't learned the British way of denying past atrocities," *The Guardian*, 27 December 2005.

¹⁷ David Gilmour, "Surprises of the Empire," *The New York Review*, 2 November 2006, p. 48. Gilmour is not alone as a defender of the empire. Other scholars who have seen positive or admirable attributes to the empire recently include Niall Ferguson, *Empire: The Rise and Demise of the British World Order and the Lessons for Global Power* (New York, 2004).

¹⁸ Catherine Hall and Sonya O. Rose (eds.), *At Home with the Empire: Metropolitan Culture and the Imperial World* (Cambridge, 2006), pp. 1–9.

nostalgic, if not entirely uncritical vision of empire. An invented memory of empire was used to contrast the mass society of the late 1970s and early 1980s with an imperial Britain that was honest and decent if a little stuffy.¹⁹

Wilson goes on to point to the connection between this boom in empire nostalgia and Thatcherite foreign policy. It is of course no coincidence that it was in 1982 that Thatcher staged the mini-revival of empire with the Falklands War.

It is important to recognize the ways in which both imperial fervour and critiques of empire have operated across and between imperial metropolises. If some defenders of empire in Britain see revisionist history as a transatlantic import—as the work of “young American scholars” that they can thus deride in an effort to quarantine British history from supposedly virulent attacks—it is necessary to see both how imperial competitiveness has operated historically and contemporaneously, and also how pro-imperialism has spread across national borders. Evidence suggests that there has been a special historical relationship between Britain and America supporting this alliance of sequential imperial powers, and that its continuing effects need to be recognized.

One remarkable recent example of the ways in which pro-imperialism has operated across national borders in both intellectual and popular culture is the stunning career of the Scottish historian Niall Ferguson. Ferguson's career, of course, has been truly remarkable. How many of us can't help but envy someone who holds not only one but TWO endowed chairs at Harvard? —as well as holding appointments at Oxford and Stanford. Not only have his books been bestsellers but he has also had television programs related to them. The astonishing success of Ferguson's transatlantic career must lead us to consider the connections between his interpretations of empire, and the recent political and military alliance between the US and Britain in Iraq. Ferguson supported the invasion of Iraq, and has defended the British Empire in the cause of urging on American imperialism. John Muthyala has commented on Ferguson's 2003 book *Empire: The Rise and Demise of the British World Order and the Lessons for Global Power* and his 2004 book *Colossus: The Price of America's Empire*:

These books offer a seductive new form of American millennial morality, complete with a secular vision of a just rule whose legitimacy can be obtained only by a renarration of empire as the gift of the white man, the white nation, and the white civilization

19 Jon Wilson, “Niall Ferguson's Imperial Passion,” *History Workshop Journal* 56 (2003), pp. 179–80.

to the unfortunate peoples of the world. As the torch of colonial Enlightenment is passed on from Britain to America, we are all asked to say "Godspeed."²⁰

Ferguson's popularity, prominence and success reveal the marketability of conservative intellectual positions, but they also provide an example of how such positions can be a product of a transatlantic exchange. Pro-imperialism in recent years, then, has been as much a transnational phenomenon as one forged within national borders about particular national stories. Popular cultural nostalgia for empire may endorse particular national imperial stories, but it too can be a transnational phenomenon—as Antoinette Burton has argued in her essay on the American market for British Raj nostalgia. Discussing American audiences' appetite for productions like "Jewel in the Crown" in the 1980s when race riots were erupting in English cities, Burton comments on "the white American clientele, who prefer their Britain PBS-style, where they can avoid the images of racial tension and violence which crowd network television in the United States and can escape into Georgian, Victorian and Edwardian worlds where bourgeois existence is uninterrupted by such things."²¹ And one can add that Raj nostalgia was enormously popular in Australia too, where its historical and contemporary resonances were differently inflected by the racial past and present of a former white-settler dominion of the British Empire.

Raj nostalgia of the 1970s and 1980s may have been differently inflected in Britain, America and Australia due to differences in racial histories and tensions, but in each of these historically-connected sites of the empire it worked to reinvent notions of white colonial rule and British imperial power. Recognizing the transnational dimensions of both imperial nostalgia and contemporary politics helps to see what is at stake in historiographical debates that are often cast within national frameworks. Arguably, the process of making colonialism historically visible has built upon the longer-entrenched historical visibility of the empire. Perhaps the success of the International Slavery Museum in Liverpool is linked to that of the British Empire and Commonwealth Museum in Bristol rather than being at odds with it. Yet, the differences in approach to empire and colonialism of the two journals and the two museums reflect a great deal about the politics of historical interpretation and the stakes involved in the current struggle over the British imperial past.

20 John Muthyala, "Twilight of the Gods: Britain, America, and the Inheritance of Empire," *American Quarterly* 57, no. 4 (2005), p. 1259.

21 Antoinette Burton, "India, Inc.? Nostalgia, Memory and the Empire of Things," in Stuart Ward (ed.), *British Culture and the End of Empire* (Manchester, 2001), p. 229.