PUTTING THE BRITISH INTO THE EMPIRE

Captives: The Story of Britain's Pursuit of Empire and How Its Soldiers and Civilians Were Held Captive by the Dream of Global Supremacy, 1600–1850. By LINDA COLLEY. New York: Pantheon, 2002. Pp. 438+17. $27.50.

The Island Race: Englishness, Empire and Gender in the Eighteenth Century. By KATHLEEN WILSON. London and New York: Routledge, 2003. Pp. 282+xiii. $80.00 (cloth); $24.95 (paper).

Linda Colley in *Britons* and Kathleen Wilson in *The Sense of the People* sought, in part, to imperialize British history by suggesting the importance of expansion in its domestic political and cultural life.[1] In *Captives* and *The Island Race*, Colley and Wilson seek to perform the opposite service of putting the British back into the British Empire, by asking what were the concrete experiences of British people at imperial peripheries? They reject a "high political" or economic focus in favor of an emphasis on the stories of ordinary men and women who confronted the strangeness of the world beyond Europe. For the British, and not just for the others, the empire appears less an experience of mastery and more one of predicament, vulnerability, and ordeal.

It is Gulliver, Colley argues, with his serial captivities and sufferings, rather than the dominant Crusoe, who represents what expansion meant for many ordinary British people in the early modern period. *Captives* is based on the examination of "captivity narratives": the memoirs written by British people who were imprisoned or enslaved overseas, whose bodies, slipping into the hands of Arabs, Amerindians, Indians, and Afghans, marked the real limits of the imperial frontier. It is divided into three sections, each about 50,000 words long, and densely illustrated (there are seventy-four images), geographically delimited, and (roughly) chronologically sequential so that North Africa leads to North America then to Asia and Stuart England flows into Georgian and ultimately Victorian Britain. Colley cunningly tangles the threads of one episode into another, linking stories about apparently alienated episodes into a portrait of the personal and psychological costs of the dispersion of the British into the world. Looming behind this scene is an argument about a key dynamic at the center of the British imperial experience: Colley suggests that the smallness and poverty of the British population provoked its extroversion ("not to say global housebreaking, violence, and theft"), which in turn led to British adventurers falling into the hands of others on distant shores, these captivities sometimes provoking new aggressions and elsewhere reminding the British of their demographic slightness and of the hubris at the heart of their imperial dream.

Captives's first section offers the most novelty with its focus on Stuart England's colony at Tangier, where amazing sums, reaching over £80,000 in the 1670s, were

[1] L. Colley, *Britons: Forging the Nation, 1707–1837* (London, 1992); K. Wilson, *The Sense of the People: Politics, Culture and Imperialism in England, 1715–1785* (Cambridge, 1995).

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spent on fortifications. These ambitious works failed, the English did not prevail, and, at the same time, thousands of these colonists were lost, at least temporarily, to North African captors. Colley estimates that over the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries some twenty thousand British people ended up as prisoners or slaves of Muslim states, whose slave raiding extended as far as Ireland and England's west coast. Colley writes vividly about the architecture, landscape, smells, and manners of North Africa. While reminding us of contemporary perceptions of the strength, power, opulence, and dignity of Islam, she questions Edward Said's view of a monolithic "Western" attitude toward the Muslim world. Islam was, she suggests, powerfully attractive to many English people, but it was clearly too a realm in which English dignity was unmanned both metaphorically and—via circumcision, sodomy, and sometimes castration—more literally. She further suggests an important shift in the middle of the eighteenth century: after 1750, at the same time that the pirate problem was brought under control, the political stability and power of Georgian Britain turned what had been only an "apparent . . . noisy . . . ritualistic" fear of Islam into a more "profound [and] formative" set of attitudes that would shape later encounter.

In a second section, Colley turns to North America and to experiences and myths of Englishmen being captured by Native Americans and of American revolutionaries and George III's troops imprisoning each other. She suggests that, in the earlier period, the narratives of "Indian raiders" rarely penetrated back to England, and a fearful and violent attitude toward Amerindians was something that early on separated colonial American culture and identity from the metropolis. But in the middle of the eighteenth century, the expanded scale of British military enterprise sent many English into Indian territory, and the savages became less noble in a new "home" genre of captivity narratives. Stories of Indian atrocities, torture, and cannibalism thus came to inform both frontier and metropolitan attitudes to expansion, as they had in Spain's Caribbean empire two centuries earlier. During the Revolutionary War, these myths acquired a second life, as propaganda on both sides sought to link the enemy, who inevitably held many thousands of prisoners of war in miserable conditions, with the bestial practices of the Amerindians (who helpfully were mostly allied with the British). Captivity, in other words, was a powerful force in shaping political identity in British North America, and Colley implies that it was an ancillary factor in the consolidation of a British imperial patriotism at the very end of the eighteenth century.

Colley concludes with a section on India in the eighteenth century and one on Afghanistan in the nineteenth, where again the British encountered Muslim power on unequal terms. The vastness and strangeness of India, relative to the few thousand British posted there, provided a benign but no less overwhelming experience of captivity. But war led to East India Company troops falling into Indian hands, and the sufferings of the British in Mysore—including the occasional mass circumcision—followed by their ultimate triumph over Tipu Sultan, via the loyalty of sepoys, challenged and then encouraged the British grasp of India. At the same time, Thomas Malthus's essay led his contemporaries to see their country as overpopulated. Together, new confidence about both the reliability of indigenous allies and Britain's capacity (indeed need) to export its sons and daughters shaped the more optimistic expansion of the nineteenth century. This outreach was not by any means all voluntary, Colley underlines: poorer Britons were press-ganged,

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drilled, and flogged onto the seas and battlefields of the world. Indeed, she reminds us, William Bentinck ended the flogging of Indian sepoys while deliberately continuing it for British troops in India. The relationship of race to the culture of imperial expansion was, she suggests, rather more complex than we might normally imagine. But the imperial confidence of the early Victorian period would be punctured by new experiences of captivity in the Afghan humiliation of 1842 and the Indian rebellion of 1857: a recognition of the fragility of British power and its dependence on the uncertain loyalties of the conquered was awakened. The book uses the Afghan adventure as a bridge to our own era's imperial moment, with Colley concluding with a penetrating analysis of how Britain's tradition of violent extroversion, its need "to punch above its weight," has led to a pernicious "inclination to pursue empire vicariously by clambouring like a mouse on the American eagle's head" (p. 376).

Captives is without doubt a brilliant piece of historical writing. Its focus on the subjectivity of those Britons at the exposed underside of imperial expansion is original and valuable. Its archival foundations are novel; except for North America, the captivity narrative has never been exploited systematically. The prose is both efficient and beautiful: startling and luminous passages of narrative and environmental description provide the sinews that move its argument forward. But one is not always persuaded.

Her argument, at its metropolitan end, assumes too much about her key sources and about attitudes to population. What did these captivity narratives actually mean to contemporaries? Colley assumes their value as testimony, and that their readers would have a traumatic identification with the vulnerability of Britons abroad. But these texts were part of a commercial literary genre and were governed, as she notes, by rhetorical conventions that seriously undermine their status as evidence. Surely, many contemporary readers would have responded to them precisely as amusing fictions, a light kind of exotic pornography, and failed to recognize in them a challenge to their own identities? It matters, in this context, how many contemporary people actually experienced exotic captivity? In the introduction Colley loosely refers to "hundreds of thousands . . . taken captive in different regions of the extra-European world" (p. 3), but her own estimates in the three sections of the book suggest that tens of thousands, dribbled over two and a half centuries, might be more accurate. Is it true that the English viewed themselves as underpopulated before Malthus's essay? Surely one of the consequences of England's late medieval agrarian history was the perception that the British Isles were overpeopled and needed to export its poor? From Richard Hakluyt's *Discourse on Western Planting* of the 1570s to Sir William Petty a century later, there was indeed a bullish confidence about England and Ireland's demographic potency. The anxiety about underpopulation that Colley identifies is surely an artifact of the eighteenth-century struggle with France, a brief and idiosyncratic turn from established perceptions, before Malthus restored older assumptions?

At the imperial end, has Colley captured the real structure of English overseas interests in the early modern period or the place of (white) captivity within it? Was Tangier really an expression of a "Mediterranean" interest, or was it not in fact understood by contemporaries as an eastern Atlantic equivalent of Jamaica: that is, as a base from which, via legal and illegal commerce, the wealth of Spain's American empire might be tapped into? Where, in any event, is the West Indies,

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whose existence she briefly takes note of (p. 209), in her portrait of England's early modern empire? The Caribbean, both for sugar and contraband, was the economic heart of the British Empire: while the crown squandered tens of thousands on Tangier, its subjects were harvesting millions in Barbados, Antigua, and Jamaica. Even in the later period too, when Colley is content to swing to the East in the arms of Vincent Harlow, Atlantic trade remained dominant well into the first third of the nineteenth century. (One wishes, as one did when reading *Britons,* that Colley would make the same investment into economic sources that she does in cultural documents.) Crucially for her argument, the most important theater of white British slavery in the period she examines was the Caribbean, where tens of thousands of indentured servants and political prisoners worked under the whip side by side with African slaves in the opening decades of the "sugar revolution."[2] This experience is not examined, nor indeed, except for a later discussion of the lot of British soldiers in India, is the weight of coercion that kept the British working class in place, particularly at the frontier of expansion, from the seventeenth century onward. Colley writes about captivity as if there were some common converse experience of autonomy, but the imperial reality known by most poor working people—whether *adscripti glebae* or indentured laborers, apprentices, soldiers, sailors, women, children—was a complex regime of captivity, mediated by violence. Marcus Rediker and Peter Linebaugh perhaps exaggerate the strength of resistance, but they map accurately the overlapping systems of subordination that were the social reality of British expansion.[3] This matters surely for how captivity was experienced, written about, and read? Colley, latterly, suggests how the abolition of African slavery precipitated improvements in the treatment of the British poor, in and out of uniform, but might she not have examined how the rise and growth of African slavery, for a far longer period, shaped how white captivity was understood or feared?

The Island Race, as a collection of essays, is shorter and less empirically dense than *Captives* but no less argumentative. It might be read as an imperial riposte to Colley's *Britons.* Wilson argues that British national identity was never stable or monolithic or singular, that there was no British nationalism but rather a connected system of "emergencies . . . crises . . . theatres . . . performances" of national identity. What will make *The Island Race* a much consulted model is its attempt across its chapters both to explore the specificity of distinct nodes of social and cultural experience and to connect them into a kind of cubist portrait of British identity. The key regions of British experience it juxtaposes are provincial England (a reprise of *The Sense of the People*), Jamaica, colonial North America, and Pacific exploration in the age of Cook. Wilson focuses on personal experience, with a particular sensitivity toward how ideas of gender and sexual difference were part of the currency of national identity. She argues that the mid-eighteenth-century period under her lens was a "constitutive moment" (p. 51) in the natu-

[2] Hilary Beckles, "'Black Men in White Skins': The Formation of a White Proletariat in West Indian Slave Society," *Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History* 15:5–21, and *White Indentured Labour and Black Slavery in Barbados* (Knoxville, Tenn., 1987).

[3] P. Linebaugh and M. Rediker, *The Many Headed Hydra: Sailors, Slaves, Commoners, and the Hidden History of the Revolutionary Atlantic* (Boston, 2000).

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ralization of an interlocking system of social, sexual, political, and racial identities that was of enduring significance for the British nation.

Wilson locates these identities through a contrapuntal method: on the one hand, there are extensive passages of narrative where she describes the movement and activity of key figures such as Captain Cook in Tahiti, Lady Acland during the American Revolutionary War, and the fascinating Teresa Phillips in London and Jamaica; on the other, Wilson reads closely how the private and public writing of Elizabeth Montagu or Johann Reinhold Forster suggest how self and other were being represented. Wilson draws together an impressive variety of source material, ranging from newspapers to natural history, private letters, paintings, travel narratives, and theater. All these are placed under a considerable theoretical pressure, as Wilson seeks explicitly to be in conversation with postmodern approaches to literature, identity, and colonialism. The book begins with an analysis of provincial associational culture and argues that both press and club life sought to constitute an imperial master class that was firmly identified in its liberties with masculinity, property, and whiteness. The second chapter swings to the Pacific, where Wilson assesses how new ideas of the British as "emancipatory," "tolerant," and "progressive" coincided with a vision of the savage as bestial, if not indeed cannibal. This culminates, Wilson suggests, with Edmund Burke conflating the French revolutionary mob, and the British more generally their continental neighbours, with South Sea savages. A third essay focuses on how British women experienced, and came to symbolize, the nation during the American Revolutionary War, exploring their "double consciousness" as subordinates and as participants in an elite. A fourth examines white creole society in Jamaica, mapping, through the career of Phillips as femme fatale and theatrical impresario (the theater of empire is here more than a metaphor), both the relationship of colonial and metropolitan identities, and how the British in that African-majority space were "transcultured" into something new. A last essay examines the strange dialogue between rigid ideas of masculinity and Enlightenment ideas of rational order and classification in Cook's voyages. Wilson suggests that while Pacific sexuality disrupted power relations and the stability of gender and class identities, scientific classification (including taxonomies of breast size and shape) joined drill and flogging as means through which Cook and his officers attempted to reassert control.

The Island Race is important and original, and Wilson's prose is witty and dazzling in its energy. But one wishes sometimes that Wilson had been less pyrotechnic and more forensic in her style. There is an endemic problem in the study of how imperialism shaped metropolitan culture: it is easy, for example, to identify racist imagery in soap advertising but much more difficult to know what people thought as they washed their hands with the unwrapped bar. Elucidating how people responded to representations requires the kind of careful focus that made Wilson's early essay on the Admiral Vernon controversy such a masterpiece.[4] One feels that Wilson is now too impatient about making the theoretical aperçu to bother to guide readers, many of whom may not be sympathetic, through the foundations of her argument. She makes repeated leaps of interpretation without explaining why they are necessary or even possible. One parliamentary speech, for

[4] Kathleen Wilson, "Empire, Trade and Popular Politics in Mid-Hanoverian Britain: The Case of Admiral Vernon," *Past and Present*, no. 121 (1988): 74–109.

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example, is allowed to support a claim that the Carib War in St. Vincent, about which one imagines 99.9 percent of Britons were unaware, "forced English observers to confront, and decry, the realities of conquest and to question the long-vaunted moral superiority of British Imperialism over its European competitors" (p. 51). Colonial theater, we are later told, "had the task of attesting to English cultural superiority" (p. 165), but Wilson never explains who assigned it this role and ensured its performance. How, and to whom, the classification of Pacific breasts really mattered is never clarified. Most crucially, Wilson never addresses the problem of how important these exotic "emergencies" actually were: is it not possible that the mental worlds of Montagu or Phillips, or even Cook, were merely idiosyncratic and peripheral to the main currents of British national identity?

When change took place is never clear. Was this period Wilson examines here, really from 1740 to 1790, a moment of crisis or just part of a longer and slower cultural salient? Clearly, the point of the book is that Wilson believes there was a rupture, but more thought might have gone into assessing the alternative continuity possibility. It might be true, for example, that liberty comes to be identified with a "strident masculinism" (pp. 36–37) in the go-go Atlantic imperial moment of the 1740s, but surely the association of the *vir* with virtue in post-Roman political thought and of property with political independence in Whig thought were rather older influences? When a cultured woman such as Montagu identifies in an elegant letter with both colonizer and colonized, is this an expression of her ambivalent gendered social location in the British Empire of the 1760s? Or was it rather a predictable affectation of men and women whose classical educations had prepared them to think in *utramque partem*, and for whom Tacitus, in particular, had offered an influential model of how one might stylishly identify with both the Roman Agricola and the noble British savage Calgalculus? Was the idea that the savage could never really become English not already emergent a century before Cook's adventures? Jamaica was surely the premier sugar producer in the British imperial system decades before 1763 (p. 161)?

Both historians treat the historiography of the British Empire as a neighbor with which one is on polite but not intimate terms. They miss many opportunities for rendezvous with the larger story of British expansion, not least because while both Colley and Wilson handle cultural documents with brilliance, neither is attracted to economic or strategic questions. That imperial expansion was often more about weakness than strength is less startling than either author seems to suggest. After all, the Gallagher-Robinson school, decades ago, had replaced Victorian and Edwardian hero worship with a focus on indigenous collaboration and resistance, and on specific crises, in explaining acquisitions and retreats. Imperial historians have long concluded that the demographic slightness of the British at imperial beachheads forced accommodations to local power and culture, most succinctly in Robinson's evocation of the thinness of the red line in his now neglected essay on "collaboration."[5]

These criticisms should not diminish our appreciation for the significant achievements of these two pioneering studies. They are creative examples of how historians

[5] Ronald Robinson, "Non-European Foundations of European Imperialism: Sketch for a Theory of Collaboration," in *Studies in the Theory of Imperialism*, ed. R. Owen and Bob Sutcliffe (London, 1972), pp. 117–42.

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might come to terms with the global dispersion of British experience in the modern era. Colley and Wilson have demonstrated extraordinary courage in coming to grips with such a range of places and historiographies. Both books, powerful and elegant pieces of writing, demonstrate the potential of an extrovert British history.

Richard Drayton, Corpus Christi College, Cambridge

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