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Book Review

Jeffrey A. Auerbach, *Imperial Boredom: Monotony and the British Empire*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020. Pp. 298. $30.99 (paperback).

Scholars of Britain and its empire have long depicted British imperialism as a project of motion and dynamism. The British Empire rose and fell; it was explored and conquered, charted and mapped, toured and traveled. In *Imperial Boredom*, Jeffrey A. Auerbach takes a different tack. Rather than focusing on the supposed grandeur of imperial spaces, Auerbach instead asks: How did ordinary people actually experience the British Empire?

In this highly original, ambitious, and enjoyable book, Auerbach answers this question by emphasizing an atypical—one might even say trivial—imperial experience: boredom. Claiming that "empire building has generally been framed in extremes" (2), Auerbach sets out to provide a more realistic, everyday account of Britons' interaction with empire. *Imperial Boredom* argues that "boredom...was neither peripheral nor incidental to the experience of empire; it was central to it, perhaps even the defining characteristic of it" (3). By making this claim, Auerbach centers what most historians have ignored; namely that emotions—specifically boredom and ennui—were at the heart of how people experienced British imperial spaces. In this sense, the book is remarkably innovative and fresh. Many historians, including this reviewer, have carelessly flipped through monotonous reports and tedious state documents searching for interesting archival tidbits or the figurative 'smoking gun' that would validate the historian's hunch. *Imperial Boredom* is a striking testament to the possibilities and potentials that emerge when historians eschew preconceived notions about what is appealing or worth studying and instead let the archive speak without prejudice.

The main tension within this book is that between expectation and reality. Auerbach examines this tension across five body chapters—Voyages, Landscapes, Governors, Soldiers, and Settlers, along with an introduction and conclusion—each of which shows how reality failed to meet expectation for these key aspects of British

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imperialism. Chapter 2: Landscapes, for example, contrasts the images and imaginaries of imperial spaces with the often-unsatisfactory reality. “The disappointing nature of many imperial landscapes,” Auerbach writes, was because “all too often imperial sites paled in comparison to the glowing treatment they received at the hands of well compensated writers and artists whose careers depended on making India, South Africa, and Australasia as attractive as possible” (46). The numerous images included throughout this book—in this chapter and elsewhere—testify to the proliferation of pictures that idealized imperial locations, which were “rarely as spectacular or novel in person as they were in paintings and engravings” (46).

Likewise, in the chapter about voyages, Auerbach contends that the circulation of travelogues and tourist tales, coupled with the popular genre of imperial fiction and biographies of the ‘Great Men’ of empire, disseminated throughout the British metropole a prevalent notion of imperial spaces as thrilling, glorious, and full of adventure—or otherwise populated by myths, legends, and marvels both known and unknown. However, for many of Britain’s imperial class, this was not true—at least, not by the Victorian period. One of Auerbach’s key claims is that the era of imperial adventure and excitement had largely abated by the nineteenth century. In its stead emerged a prevailing sense of despondence and weariness: “British men and women [in the empire] found the landscape monotonous, the physical and psychological distance from home enervating, the routines of everyday life tedious, and their work dull and unfulfilling” (3). The bureaucratization of governance, the crystallization of racial divides that prevented fraternization between white Britons and non-white Indigenous people, the dearth of new lands to explore or scientific discoveries to be made, the harsh realities of settler life…these characteristics of the nineteenth century empire belied the narratives of excitement and fulfillment and exhilaration that had been spoon-fed to many Britons through imperial propaganda and popular culture. According to Auerbach, this divergence was not incidental; there was a direct relationship between the peak of imperial fiction, advertising, and travel during the Victorian period—all of which stoked unprecedented pride and interest in the empire—and the fact that, simultaneously, the empire was at its least interesting.

This book raises a provocative question: What is specifically “imperial” about boredom? If his first claim is that boredom with the empire served as a “unifying experience for British men and women across the long nineteenth century” (10), Auerbach’s second main claim is that boredom was a consequence of capitalist modernity that matured, at least in Britain, throughout the nineteenth century. While this claim is compelling, it is hard to imagine that boredom was not a feature of the long sea voyages or protracted exploration of the wilderness that characterized the British Empire of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Indeed, if Auerbach’s claim is that the emergence of modernity, first in Europe and then exported to the rest of the world via the vehicle of empire, is what generated the tedium that so disillusioned Victorians, then we must ask again: If boredom is an outgrowth of how people make meaning in their lives in the context of modernity, what is imperial about boredom? Here again, Auerbach relies on expectation to provide an answer. Imperialists had been "promised jobs, tiger hunts, and skirmishes with savage tribesmen." Instead, what they found was "poverty, fruitless days hacking through the jungle, and interminable hours sitting in tents or marching across dusty plains." This discrepancy between promise and practice, between the mythology and reality of empire, "led [Britons] to express feelings of boredom with their lives, and with the disappointing, unsatisfying situations in which they found themselves" (181-182). While Auerbach ably demonstrates the truth to this incongruity and clearly shows how expectations were built and then sabotaged, there could be many other reasons why one felt bored, discontented, or restless with the minutia of modern life that had little to do with empire itself. Victorian restrictions on race, class, or gender—or the alienation of the individual from fulfilling work and a meaningful existence that characterizes modern life—are equally probable explanations for the "banality [of] the British imperial experience" (188). Thus, it seems dubious for Auerbach to assert that "expressions of boredom were very much veiled confessions of discontent with the empire itself" (182). Simply because one was bored or unfulfilled with their experience in the empire does not mean that they were uninvested or apathetic to the broader project of British imperialism.

The most unpalatable aspect of *Imperial Boredom* is that it implicitly asks us to sympathize with imperialists and colonizers, whose experiences with the empire failed to meet their expectations. Some readers (including this reviewer) might find it difficult to commiserate with the sense of frustration, ennui, or exasperation felt by the Britons who enthusiastically left Europe for what they imagined to be an imperial playground, only to discover the doldrums of daily life. After all, the disenchantment with empire felt by the innumerable men and women who left British shores was a prison of their own making. By this, I mean that generations of empire building had made the world knowable, accessible, and predictable. In other words, the boredom described by notable imperial figures like George Orwell or Mary Kingsley was the outcome of the very processes through which the British built and maintained their empire: the Anglicization of cultures and landscapes, the bureaucratization of governance, the conquest of nature, the literal and figurative excavation of overseas space, and the subjugation of Indigenous people. Thus, if boredom was the defining feature of people's experience with the British Empire, as Auerbach asserts, it was only because the British had made their empire so boring. Auerbach convincingly proves that Victorian men and women were disappointed with their experiences with empire. But this begs an unanswered question that haunts this book: If imperial space was so monotonous, tedious, and uninspiring, why did the British hold on to the empire for so long?

Imperial Boredom contains interesting lessons and parallels for our current moment. In the age of social media, where every post is carefully curated and filtered, expectations for travel/tourism have never been higher, yet more unrealistic compared to the average experience. Cost, crowds, communication, cultural difference…even things as simple as weather or dirt can make travel generally—and tourist hotspots specifically—disappointing, frustrating, and perhaps even boring. Certainly, anyone who has visited the Trevi Fountain or Stonehenge can sympathize with the sensations of disillusionment and exasperation with the actuality of even such extremely popular, historically significant, or aesthetically beautiful sites. In this sense, *Imperial Boredom* is relevant in that it raises existential questions about living a fulfilled life in a world where capitalist modernity has commodified experiences and in which expectation far outstrips reality. For these reasons, and because the book successfully and creatively reframes the British Empire around the felt emotion, *Imperial Boredom* is very much worth reading.

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