Book Review

■ Ashley Cohen, *The Global Indies: British Imperial Culture and the Reshaping of the World, 1756–1815*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2020. Pp. viii + 309. $65.00 (hardcover)

Britons of the Georgian Era were proud of their empire, but how close did they feel to their colonies overseas? *The Global Indies* presents the East and West Indies as the British would have regarded them, particularly as Britain became the undisputed master of the Atlantic world. Through examination of theater and literature, Ashley Cohen describes the significance of the Indies in popular culture and also illustrates how the British regarded their growing empire between the Seven Years' War and the end of the Napoleonic Wars.

Cohen asserts that an updated *mentalités* approach will help readers better understand how Georgian Era Britons thought of the two Indies. Cohen's strength lies in tying British popular culture to contemporary worldviews and by effectively comparing that culture's political satire to present day *Saturday Night Live* skits. The British were voracious readers and consummate theatergoers. Keeping this in mind, Cohen presents a world in which the British saw themselves as the center of the empire, but with the distant Indies in close mental proximity instead of half a physical world away. Mentally, the Indies were practically Britain's neighbors and thus were easily accessible.

By initially focusing on theater and popular literature, Cohen highlights how the British regarded world events. The American Revolution was a global war, and British readers read about military campaigns in the Thirteen Colonies and the West Indies alongside reports of battles on the Indian subcontinent during the Anglo-Mysore wars. Given the long delays in communication, it was normal for readers to be updated on far-flung events that took place months apart in the same issue.

Cohen goes further to explore how the British felt connected to global commerce. A storm or spate of privateers anywhere in their maritime trade networks could mean higher insurance rates for merchant houses and consumer prices for customers everywhere. This particular segment should interest readers who are curious about economics, especially since the world is currently experiencing constant supply-chain disruptions. The British readership was emotionally invested in commerce and so they regarded the stories of Indian opulence with a degree of awe. Elements of Indian court intrigue found their way into British theater and the harem scenes became cultural tropes. Those studying masculinity and hypersexuality will find much to work with here.

Cohen also illuminates the inconsistencies in the British worldview. They appreciated revolutionary sentiment, as long as that sentiment was expressed by whites who were not too radical. The British exhibited anti-slavery attitudes provided they could make that notion compatible with anti-French sentiment. At the same time, Indian slavery was more acceptable when rationalized into "debt bondage." It is here that Cohen utilizes Saidiya Hartman's *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997) and Lisa Lowe's *The Intimacies of Four Continents* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2015) and expands upon their points.

Cohen continues her work with descriptions of aristocrats' travels in the Indies, which provides much material for diplomatic and colonial historians. Serving as an administrator overseas required patronage and favor. Many administrators transferred to different colonies and so they carried their experiences in the West Indies to the East Indies, and vice-versa. The Indies also functioned as an aristocratic social safety net; a British aristocrat living in genteel poverty could reverse his ill fortune by governing the Bahamas or Jamaica for several years. This was not exclusive to the post-Seven Years' War period; this reviewer's own subject, the privateer Woodes Rogers, secured a governorship in the West Indies during George I's reign after Rogers' personal finances fell apart.

Despite the salvation that the Indies offered aristocratic families, they frowned upon becoming too comfortable with local culture. Cohen explains that self-made *nabobs* gained an admirable reputation for creating opulent lifestyles for themselves, but they were never quite accepted into British high society unless they could convert that wealth into acceptable British social graces. That meant dressing as landed gentry ought to, attending the theater, and hosting lavish feasts. For readers who are curious about that kind of lifestyle, this book meshes well with Troy Bickham's *Eating the Empire: Food and Society in Eighteenth-Century Britain* (London: Reaktion Books, 2020) and Jeremy Black's *Culture in Eighteenth-Century England: A Subject for Taste* (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2007).

Their children were sent to Britain for schooling in order to avoid creolization. Other historians specializing in different time periods can capitalize on this, using Cohen's work as a foundation. Britons working in foreign service sent their children to British public schools throughout the nineteenth century, and some schools such as Haileybury became well known for hosting East India Company employees' children.

Cohen's work is valuable because it provides insight into *how* the British viewed their world and how they regarded those who lived and worked in the Indies. By utilizing playbills, theater scripts, and a variety of contemporary newspapers, Cohen at once makes her subjects seem very human who regarded the Indies with a mix of admiration, curiosity, and condescension. *The Global Indies* should be a useful piece for any social historian or cultural geographer.

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