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Bernard Porter. *The Absent-Minded Imperialists: Empire, Society, and Culture in Britain*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004. 475p.

PRECIOUS MCKENZIE-STEARNs  
UNIVERSITY OF SOUTH FLORIDA

*The Absent-Minded Imperialists* is a detailed analysis of 19th-century British society and as such reexamines the Empire's place in the everyday lives of Britons. The central claim of this book, which the author goes to great lengths to prove, is that the Empire affected everyone materially but, before 1880, the Empire was not "a widespread preoccupation" (138). Porter credits the scholarship of Edward Said and John MacKenzie with bringing imperial history "out of its ghetto" and placing imperial studies in the mainstream (ix). Yet, *The Absent-Minded Imperialists* questions the methods of imperial historians and post-colonial scholars such as Said and MacKenzie who search for "hidden imperial signals" in literature in hopes of demonstrating the Empire's impact (140). Rather than rely on literary interpretation, Porter evaluates textbooks, performances, exhibits, novels, newspapers, magazines, and administrative proceedings of the Victorian era to establish the actual role imperialism played in the century.

Although religion, gender, and the urban-rural divide influenced Britons' perceptions of themselves and others, class functioned as the primary marker of how one perceived the Empire. Middle-class imperialism differed significantly from imperialism as experienced by the lower and upper classes (64). Specifically, Porter examines public schools' curricula on British history. What he finds is a lack of standardization. British imperial history, taught in British schools, was "quite scattered" (53). "The most obvious imperialists" emerged from the upper and upper-middle classes who were long acquainted with ruling others, and who believed they had "the right to rule others" (228). It appears these classes felt the most pride in running the Empire (39). Middle-class imperialism differed in that the middle class viewed British imperialism as an avenue for free trade. Such thoughts equated free trade with free choice; this took power and exploitation "out of the equation entirely" (94). The middle class also held dear the belief in the progress of man. Non-Europeans were thought of as "'behind' Britain in their social and political development but capable of emulating her, and warmly congratulated when they did" (102). This patronizing attitude also applied to the middle classes' treatment of the working classes and the poor. The pitiful conditions of working-class schools combined with the "narrowness" and toil of their work lives left little time for members of the working class "to think of much beyond where one's next meal was coming from" (123). Although members of all classes were complicit in the Empire, their perceptions of and experiences with imperialism differed significantly.

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*The Absent-Minded Imperialists* tackles a broad subject by effectively narrowing the focus to evaluate the impact of the British Empire on a class by class basis. Porter provides strong evidence from a variety of sources ranging from educational practices, immigration, trade, Victorian philosophies on race (and racism), to quotations from missionaries, intellectuals, traders, explorers and politicians of the era. Britain's relationships with China, New Zealand, Jamaica, India, Ireland and South Africa are also explored throughout the text. This is perhaps one of the liveliest historical texts on the British Empire available on the market. However, as one of those post-colonial "code breakers" the author pokes fun at, I find *The Absent-Minded Imperialists* overlooks rather convincing evidence of the Empire's impact, especially in regards to Victorian advertising, adventure tales, and travel writing. Nevertheless, this text certainly provides an innovative argument on the British Empire and could prove a valuable tool for stimulating discussion (and perhaps disagreement) in the college classroom. ✱