



*Projecting Imperial Power:  
New Nineteenth-Century Emperors  
and the Public Sphere*

**Helen Watanabe-O'Kelly**

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*Projecting Imperial Power. New Nineteenth-Century Emperors and the Public Sphere.* By Helen Watanabe-O’Kelly. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021. ISBN 978-0-19-880247-1. xviii + 334 pp. £35.

**H**elen Watanabe-O’Kelly’s *Projecting Imperial Power* analyses the imperial status projected by the nineteenth century’s newly proclaimed emperors, and as the title indicates focuses on the recurring theme of showmanship and public propaganda. Rulers from six countries (France, Britain (via India), Germany, Austria, Mexico, and Brazil) form the cast of this compelling study and include well-known historical figures such as Napoleon I, as well as often neglected individuals such as Agustín of Mexico. O’Kelly notes that when she viewed the cloak of the emperor of Austria, made in 1830, she asked “why did Franz need a new imperial cloak when he had been Franz II, Holy Roman Emperor, since 1792?” (1) This question, alongside ones related to courts and costumes, ceremonial and religion, and festivals and museums, set O’Kelly on her path for answers. Explaining the structure of the book and the sources and scholarship consulted, O’Kelly briefly offers relevant information on core terms that shape the study. Namely, symbolic power, legitimation through tradition, and emperors and modernity. Chapter One focuses on two characters “who exemplify two contrasting methods of projecting imperial power” (17). Napoleon employed a panoply of power, such as his coronation, to disguise the fact that he was Corsican parvenu who achieved power through his military exploits. The other, the unprepossessing Franz I, emperor of Austria, presided over a dynasty underpinned by ancient lineage going back to Charlemagne, and shunned military uniforms for the simple black frock coat in the fulfilment of his daily duties as the embodiment of the administrator emperor. Chapter Two provides a fascinating account of how imperial titles came into existence in “colonial territories far from Europe” (40). The author explains the process leading to Mexican independence from Spain, and the creation of Agustín as emperor in 1822. Copying the Napoleonic model where an emperor was crowned and anointed in a cathedral, O’Kelly shines a light on the importance of developing a public festival culture that enabled celebrations centred around independence and which allowed Agustín to present himself publicly.

Chapter Three investigates the imperial court which helped the emperor play his role. O’Kelly relates in detail the strict requirements necessary to become a member of court society in the rigid Habsburg monarchy. The individuals that surrounded the monarch often did so in court dress, military uniform, and bejewelled with honours. In India, it has been shown that while European honours established a hierarchy with the monarch at the apex, importing a European system into the Indian Empire caused difficulties for the British. Chapter Four shifts attention to the imperial consort and the Belgian-born Charlotte (known in Mexico as Carlota), who suffered more than her counterparts. Departing for Europe in mid-1866 to try to raise military and financial support for her newly adopted homeland, the empress was never to see her husband again. If Carlota played an important political role, she failed in what O’Kelly labels the most important task—providing an heir. The chapter touches on the charitable activities of consorts, particularly in the realm of education and

health, and the importance of beauty and fashion, which, thanks to the rise of photography, came to dominate the function of an imperial consort.

Monarchy is reliant on the relationship between ruler and ruled, and being seen cements the relationship. Supported by illustrations by court artists such as Franz Xaver Winterhalter, Chapter Five explores the emperor in person and uniform, as servant of the people, and more. For example, O’Kelly demonstrates that the Hohenzollerns associated themselves with the military and the army occupied a central pillar in their monarchical power. Even in exile Wilhelm II refused to abandon his image as the epitome of Prussian militarism. Religion was employed by imperial regimes as a method of legitimising their divine mandate. As well as examining Napoleon’s use of the church for the christening of his son, Chapter Six focuses on the Hohenzollern emperors as defenders of Protestantism and church-building. In Germany church building was not restricted to those such as the Emperor Wilhelm Memorial church to honour Wilhelm I, but it was exported to places such as Palestine, where Wilhelm

II donated land so that what is today the Benedictine Abbey of the Dormition could be built. Chapter Seven takes the reader through the streets of imperial cities. By redesigning the urban landscape, emperors could create ceremonial avenues and great cities from which to project their power. Between 1858-1862 Paris staged ceremonies for three important thoroughfares: the Boulevard de Sébastopol, the Boulevard Malesherbes, and the Boulevard du Prince Eugène. The ceremonies, reported in the French and foreign press, provided an opportunity for the emperor and empress to present themselves to their people in solemn processions.

Emperors had to promote their empires and themselves to their peoples and the wider world. One way to do this was via international exhibitions. Chapter Eight shines a light not just on the countries staging these exhibitions, such as Vienna, but also the empires taking part. Pedro II participated in four international exhibitions, and his personal involvement played an important role in the promotion of Brazil as an untapped source of raw materials and land of opportunity to immigrants in Europe and the United States. Chapter Nine explores how during the twentieth century an imperial identity was invented and promoted in India. O’Kelly explains that by impressing the Indian peoples with structures such as the Victoria Memorial Hall and two durbars in 1903 and 1911, it showed the world that unity had been achieved between London and the imperial city, New Delhi. But the need existed to convince the British of their imperial mission too. The Festival of Empire in 1911 and the British Empire Exhibition in 1924 aimed to educate the British peoples by placing India into the context of the other colonies that formed the British Empire. Next, O’Kelly shifts the attention to Austria and Germany, and looks at imperial mythmaking. At a time of increasingly affordable newspapers, better informed subjects, and the rise of those with voting powers, emperors needed to persuade their peoples that an indissoluble bond existed between monarch and those they ruled. With fewer of the populace believing in the will of a divinely appointed ruler, O’Kelly looks at case studies like Franz Joseph’s Diamond Jubilee in 1908, to demonstrate the power of theatre and pageantry. The final chapter deals with how empires ended and are remembered today. Some ended

peacefully, like Brazil, while others, like the German example, due to the consequence of warfare. O’Kelly explains how many imperial buildings have been repurposed, such as the Hofburg, once the seat of the Austrian emperors and now the workplace of the Austrian president. Through tourism the flame of empire is kept burning—be it by the tourist taking photographs in front of the Gateway of India, built to honour George V, or through statues, often erected posthumously, which act as a reminder of former imperial days.

This ground-breaking study is the first, as the book’s blurb states, “to consider together these newly proclaimed emperors in six territories on three continents across the whole of the long nineteenth-century.” The author draws upon a wealth of written sources and offers a multifaceted approach, exploring how these monarchs projected an imperial aura through courts, honours, coronations, city planning, and much more. This absorbing book brings new perspectives to key themes in the history of emperorship.

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