



*Royal Tourists, Colonial Subjects and
the Making of a British World, 1860–
1911*

Charles V. Reed

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Review By: Laura Cook

Royal tourists, colonial subjects and the making of a British world, 1860–1911. By Charles V. Reed. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2016. ISBN 978-0-8190-9701-0. xxx + 256 pp. £70.00.

This fascinating book examines the cultural phenomenon of imperialism in the context of later Victorian and Edwardian royal tours of empire. Charles Reed, an Assistant Professor of History at Elizabeth City State University in North Carolina, U.S.A., seeks here to reconfigure this type of encounter between royals and colonial subjects as a ritual space wherein new British political and cultural traditions could be alternately forged and contested. In offering a comparative perspective on both domestic and colonial imaginings of imperial culture, this work provides a new adjunct to existing literature examining the intersection between studies of empire and royal rituals, and the implications of associated ‘invented traditions’.

Rather than attempting an exhaustive study of particular tours or locales, the author looks instead to a representative selection of individuals, who through their actions and expressions capitalised on the context of royal tours to renegotiate a complex and shifting imperial culture outside of the metropole. In search of prominent intellectuals, political rulers and other cosmopolitan ‘respectables’ of African, Asian and Maori descent, Reed draws upon an impressive scope of contemporary source material held by a diverse range of collecting institutions. These include the Royal Archives at Windsor, the British Library, the University of Cape Town Archives and the Auckland Public Library. He skilfully negotiates the challenges of this complex undertaking, finding that between the early tours of the 1860s and King George V’s coronation durbar of 1911, the unique context generated offered some individuals the means to both challenge and destabilise the multiplicity of agendas at play within the developing ‘British world’.

The first section of the book discusses the development of a template for the royal tour, or a ritual apparatus of sorts, during the second half of the nineteenth century. Chapter one compellingly traces the development of the royal tour as a means of fostering an imperial identity during the later Victorian period. The author considers the concurrent establishment of symbolic representations of Queen Victoria, the ‘Great White Queen’, as the ever-present guardian of the nation-empire. Despite Victoria’s own disinclination for touring, Reed observes that her son Albert Edward (later King Edward VII) and grandson George (later King George V) more readily accepted their roles as exemplary imperial representatives. Nonetheless, they barely endured the tedium of these ritualised duties. Chapter two further

outlines the parallel development of a shared set of imperial ritualistic practices that aimed, to varying degrees, to incorporate local traditions. Here the author draws on examples from Africa, South Asia and New Zealand to demonstrate how in many cases royal tourists and local political rulers actively resisted or capitalised on the implications of British authority to their own advantage.

Having established the malleable political context of royal tours, the book now turns to a more specific examination of the ways individual historical actors moved within the empire. Using a range of written sources, chapter three analyses the ways in which the New Zealand and South African colonial press and local elites were able to adapt connections to the British world by fashioning unique imperial identities during the latter half of the nineteenth century. This served to help create a cultural environment mutually conducive to the development and evolution of settler nationalism by the turn of the twentieth century. Continuing this argument, chapter four offers further fresh insight into the claims made on British rights and responsibilities by a small group of modern cosmopolitan African and South Asian writers, intellectuals and lobbyists. It serves to identify a new perspective on the ways royal tours provided these men with the opportunity to both renegotiate and contest an imagined community of empire, yet without compromising their own histories and experiences.

In the final chapter, Reed turns the lens of analysis back towards the visits of colonial New Zealand and African delegations to Britain. Within a long-established tradition of journeys undertaken by groups and individuals hoping to appeal to the monarch, citizens acted on their dissatisfaction with empire politics and colonial governance by calling directly upon the imperial metropole to address issues of injustice. In his discussion of an 1884 Maori delegation to London, and that of a South African group in 1909, Reed finds such visits were celebrated by the local press, yet at the same time largely ignored by the imperial government and the monarch. The book concludes with a discussion of the 1911 Delhi durbar as the pinnacle of the performance of imperial culture by the British monarch, all the more starkly rendered against a powerful emerging Indian nationalist identity.

This publication goes far in exploring the contours of a transient and complex ritual apparatus that underpinned a network of ideas about what it meant to be an imperial citizen in the British world of the later nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Although detailed discussion of individual case studies is necessarily limited within a work of this scope, each does nonetheless demonstrate the interest and validity of Reed's methodological approach. Through the medium of royal tours, he argues for the repositioning of cultural and political agency from the British metropole to a multiplicity of

historical actors and peripheral imperial spheres, concluding that “these encounters demonstrate how imperial culture, fragile and unstable, uncontainable and uncontrollable, was made in the empire” (193). Here, disparate local politics can be seen to emphasis a common co-ownership of empire; a prevalent concept powerfully manifested in the commentary of those with peripheral ethnic or racial claims to Britishness.

This publication, the author’s first full-length monograph, ably demonstrates some of the possibilities of a localised and biographical methodological approach to social and cultural analyses. It marks a solid contribution to present historical understanding of how local and nationalist identities are adapted within the ritualised framework of royal tours, themselves increasingly prominent within concurrent and swiftly expanding spheres of inter-disciplinary scholarship on imperialism in all its guises. *Royal tourists, colonial subjects and the making of a British world, 1860–1911* will be of great relevance to scholars examining the overlapping spheres of Australasian, African and South Asian colonial and post-colonial politics within the continuing legacy of the British imperial world. I look forward to reading more of this author’s work.

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