Introduction: Imperialisms: Early Modern to Premodernist

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I

In researching imperialisms, postcolonial critics and historians have concentrated on retrieving subjected cultures from the stereotypes in which they were embedded. Scholarship on empire has been much less engaged with characterizing cultures of dominance, in part because the sheer weight of dominance has precluded consideration of its varieties. Moreover, postcolonialists tend to nourish the proposition that the nuances of exploitation matter little to the exploited. In the words of V. K. Krishna Menon, defence minister for India in the early 1960s, asking a subject people what imperialism it prefers is like asking a fish whether it would rather be fried in margarine or butter. There is enough in this quip to make distinctions between imperialisms seem a matter of scholarly rather than real importance. Yet, notwithstanding their similarities, imperialisms do differ, often substantially, and have their individual ways of articulating these differences. Each imperial nation devises its own characteristic propaganda and separates itself emphatically from other nations and empires if only to advertise its special entitlement to power. Even today the propaganda for benevolent liberal imperialisms (by scholars such as Niall Ferguson)\(^1\) demonstrates that imperialist fictions of self-justification are still alive and still being invented.

Imperialisms are formed and written in relation to specific cultural histories. Moreover, imperial powers construct not only subjected sites but competing imperialisms in order to arrive at images of themselves.
Scholars have yet to examine these complexities adequately. The purpose of this cross-disciplinary book is to explore various early imperialisms, their practices, their convergences and differences, and their attitudes to coexisting or competing imperialisms, thus bringing out the varieties and nuances of dominance.

Theories of Empire, 1450–1800, an important collection of reprinted essays that provides an overview of the field of early imperialisms, has shown us that the field is anything but overworked. Anthony Pagden’s Lords of all the World remains the best scholarly work on this topic, but its primary concern is with ideologies rather than discourses and the enmeshing of culture with those discourses. Professor Pagden himself has acknowledged the need for further study by generously providing this volume with its closing essay. Lords of all the World focuses on the Atlantic theater and on English, French, and Spanish imperialisms within that theater. A recently published volume on multiple imperialisms, Empires: Perspectives from Archaeology and History, concentrates mainly on ancient imperialisms. Neither book examines the relationship between Asia and early modern empires.

A book characterizing imperial ideologies and practices in relation to their different cultural histories and in terms of their changing narratives of nationhood is too large in scope for any single scholar to produce. Such a book is inherently a multiauthor work but one that is badly needed. The difficulties of compiling a study of this nature and of identifying and analysing the main sites of imperialism are obvious and can be formidable; but there has never been a more propitious time for such an undertaking.

Consisting of literary analyses, contextual studies, historical essays, and case studies, Imperialisms is divided into five chronologically arranged sections, which encourage cross-examinations of conversant and competing imperialisms over a period of four centuries. As the imperialisms with which audiences are most likely to be familiar, European and particularly British imperialisms generally serve as points of reference throughout the volume. The contributors to Imperialisms demonstrate that imperialist powers fashion themselves in relation to ideas about nationhood, in relation to rival empires from which they discriminate themselves, and in relation to territories for which they compete.

One of the many challenges faced by the contributors to this volume is to annotate the terms “empire” and “imperialism,” the meanings of which remain in flux throughout the centuries. “Empire” in an early