Bill Schwarz, *The White Man’s World (Memories of Empire)*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2011; pp. 600; RRP $54 hardback

Bill Schwarz’s important new book is the first in a promised *Memories of Empire* trilogy dealing with the legacy of empire in modern England. It also gives the sense of being a culmination of a career built on many of the themes that Schwarz blends here. Taking inspiration from recent scholarly attention given to the ‘British World’, this first volume charts the history of England’s own postcolonial social antagonisms. As such it delves into the fraught areas of memory, critical race theory, and masculinity studies among others to elucidate and de-normalize the category of the *white man* (both words of the title are crucial) that was constituted in the imaginative and mediated transactions between the metropole and its white colonies. The book begins with the dramatic fallout of Enoch Powell’s scandalous 1968 ‘Rivers of Blood’ speech before tracing a rough chronology from the latter part of the nineteenth century toward the mid-twentieth century, centred on key historical figures and illuminating digressions into more theoretical terrain. Schwarz by and large eschews a traditional narrative with the book moving ‘back and forth, between past and present, between history and memory, and between metropole and colony’ (p.20). This spasmodic approach, combined with the book’s daring ambition, is clearly not without risk. Moreover, Schwarz’s thorough attention to individual actors and episodes raises inevitable questions as to the opportunity cost of these decisions. Yet these are always unenviable choices for any historian and in Schwarz’s hands they are easily justified and succeed superbly in supporting his case.

The book can be roughly split into two sections with the first providing a thorough historical and theoretical context, not only for the remainder of this volume but for the two to come. Schwarz’s primary suggestion in these early chapters is that the British Empire’s white colonies signified ‘an idea which evoked an imagined or a lost time, and which articulated this desire through the categories of racial whiteness’ and which in turn represented a ‘memory of empire’ (p.164). This fantasy of an overseas utopia offered a necessary displacement of concerns about the enfeebling of England itself. The second half of the book builds on this platform by focusing on extended examples of the pervasive power of racialised masculine whiteness in Southern Africa with consecutive chapters centred on the South African War, Jan Smuts, the Central African Federation and Ian Smith. Earlier, the somewhat more expected roll call of individuals (Dilke, Froude, Seeley, Carlyle, Mill, Chamberlain, Milner, Buchan etc) is dealt with in fresh ways while those seeking out Australian examples are treated to a lengthy analysis of the roots of the White Australia Policy narrated through the singular figure of Henry Parkes.

The particular charm of the book lies in its nuanced style and method. It is a tribute to Schwarz’s expressive prose and his obvious deep (and personal) engagement with his topic that what in lesser writers might result in turgid over-theorising in this instance sits comfortably at the intersection of several academic fields. The key move for Schwarz is an analysis of texts (fiction and non-fiction) that locates a return of repressed imperial memory in unexpected places. A central chapter thus contains an extended and theoretically subtle discussion of the methodological problems confronted by a
researcher in accounting for memory.

Schwarz, keenly aware of the contentiousness of his method in empiricist circles, fixes his sights on the doyen of British Imperial history, Bernard Porter. What a traditional empiricist approach such as Porter’s misses, argues Schwarz, is an explanation of ‘what has been made silent, or invisible’ (p.14). That is, just because empire was not spoken of during and after its disintegration, does not mean that its effects were not real and lasting. Yet for a book that centres largely on themes of the lingering effects of traumatic memory there is a curiously circumspect employment of psychoanalytical theory. In one passage (p.203) Schwarz equivocates as to whether psychoanalytic theory can or should be used in historical enquiry. However, given the general suspicion of such explanatory models in historiography this is entirely understandable if not somewhat ironic. Similarly, given the subject matter, it was perhaps surprising to have seen only cursory mentions of Homi Bhabha (though if anything this is a result of Schwarz’s overfamiliarity with Bhabha and his ilk).

None of this is to suggest that Schwarz’s own work isn’t deeply researched. Rather, his imposing and innovative synthesis of the extant literature assuages any fears of the dilettantism that could easily accompany a study skipping lightly between disciplines, theoretical stances and historical moments. His apparent no-stone-unturned approach to research compels the reader to jealously seek out those books that Schwarz might have missed, while leaving one frustrated at the absence of a bibliography to rein it all in. Structurally, too, a concluding chapter would have provided valuable symmetry and a summary of ideas to prepare for the next volume of the trilogy, though the comprehensiveness of the introductory chapters here was probably considered enough to render such a conclusion superfluous.

These quibbles aside, this eminently readable book is likely to be considered a landmark in its field. Scholars will find in its wealth of knowledge tantalising new avenues for future research, while its effortless crossing between academic boundaries offers a reminder of just how good interdisciplinary history can be.

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