

Beyond Time and Space: Imperial Manliness in the Fictions of Empire

[*Masculinity and the New Imperialism: Rewriting Manhood in British Popular Culture, 1870-1914*](#). Bradley Deane. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014. 273 pp.

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<1>“Imperialism,” remarked the critic Charles Grey Robertson in 1891, “is for action, but always on the lines that have led to success and prosperity in the past. [The Imperialist’s] love of strenuousness is governed by his respect for history. It is, indeed, the historical spirit which on his side gives its whole colour to the movement.”⁽¹⁾ Like Robertson, Bradley Deane’s remarkable monograph foregrounds a facet of New Imperialist ideology rarely studied in its own right, but one which recurs as part of countless fictions of empire and underpins late-Victorian codifications of masculinity – the New Imperialist’s relationship with history. Imperialist discourse, Deane contends, was preoccupied with ancient, even “savage” standards of robust physical manliness or, more specifically, with the collapsing of those boundaries between past, present, and future, and between “savage” and “civilized” gender ideals. Through a series of vibrant chapters dealing with the “fantastic timescapes” (18) of lost world novels, mummy fictions, and the future fictions of H. G. Wells, Deane’s book identifies a rhetoric of timelessness in imperialist discourse that advocates an enduring standard of manliness rooted in physical competition and conflict.

<2>Following the emergence of masculinity studies as a discipline in the 1990s, the tendency among scholars has been to present New Imperialism as a single chapter – usually the final chapter – in a larger story of nineteenth-century masculine development. Deane’s book is thus a welcome consolidation of existing narratives, but it also makes a valuable and insistent case for new understandings of the importance of popular literature in reflecting, but also shaping, masculine ideals. The introduction follows John Tosh’s *Manliness and Masculinities in Nineteenth-Century Britain* (2005) in locating the origins of New Imperialism in the late-Victorian rejection of mid-century domesticity, as well as in broader political shifts. Deane charts a movement away from Liberal, Gladstonian notions of the civilizing mission of empire and towards a more robust expansionist imperial agenda. This narrative forms the basis for Deane’s “profound reorientation of the very notion of better manhood” (4). Competition and

survival – from the frontiers of empire to the microbial level of immunological resistance depicted in Wells’s *War of the Worlds* – are the hallmarks of better men. “Where early and mid-Victorian ideals of masculinity emphasized narratives of personal development (I am a better man than I was),” Deane summarizes in a characteristically succinct fashion, “later imperialist stories stressed continual competition (I am a better man than he is)” (4). Furthermore, in what amounts to a refreshing complication of colonial and postcolonial discussions of the “noble savage,” the book asserts that the most potent embodiments of the strength and ludic guile of the “better man” are to be found in fictions of empire among the “boys, foreigners, and the men of Britain’s past” (16). Drawing on the works of Kipling, Haggard and others, Deane demonstrates how “stereotypes of savagery became potent symbols of masculine possibilities so that atavism could be imagined as a sign of strength rather than weakness, exoticism as one of virility rather than effeminacy, and the relapse into barbarism as an empowering fantasy rather than a paralyzing anxiety” (8).

<3>Chapter One affirms that, despite the “deeper structural racism” (49) inherent in the literature of empire, canonical texts are more interested in (and more interesting when) finding examples of better manhood among Britain’s imperial subjects. Chapter Two provides a lively illustration of how such ideas could be performed by the British imperialist via the practice of cultural cross-dressing, with literary examples drawn from Haggard and Henty, and historical ones in the personages of Cecil Rhodes and Robert-Baden Powell. Both Rhodes and Baden-Powell appear as illustrations in the book, garbed to varying degrees in the masculine emblems and apparel of colonial races. The inclusion of well-chosen images that capture the essence of a key argument brings to this book the lively, unpretentious quality which is a hallmark of Deane’s scholarship.

<4>Chapter Three, “Piracy, Play, and the Boys Who Wouldn’t Grow Up,” is based on a previous article for which Deane was awarded Honorable Mention for the Donald Gray Prize in 2012. In it he theorizes an aspect of imperial manliness which he terms the “imperial play ethic” and which he traces in the often-overlooked genre of the Victorian pirate story. In these texts, piracy becomes an imperial ideal since it embraces amoral competition and a form of eternal boyhood where status can be won through combat and guile rather than through moral development. The British Empire itself, in this formulation, is rendered as a playground or arena for the “better man.”

<5>A fourth chapter continues to interrogate representations of childhood, this time in the popular genre of schoolboy fiction which was produced both for and about the Victorian youths who would grow up to defend Britain’s imperial interests. Deane emphasizes that “boyhood,” as it figures in these texts, is both an important developmental phase wherein masculine values could be inculcated as well as a metaphor for the “primitive impulses of savagery” (119) which

underpins New Imperialism's insistence on robust physical competition as a marker of masculine ideality. In a book which weaves together so richly examples drawn from both canonical texts and lesser-known authors, this chapter is the only one which feels a little safe in its reliance on the "big three" schoolboy novels of the period – Thomas Hughes's *Tom Brown's Schooldays* (1857), F.W. Farrar's *Eric; or, Little By Little* (1858), and Rudyard Kipling's *Stalky and Co.* (1899). Nonetheless, the chosen texts illustrate effectively the shift away from Liberal Imperial ideologies of the "civilizing mission" of both school and empire, towards "an image of natural boyish savagery which was not to be educated away but harnessed in service of British power" (119). Conceivably, the ordering of Chapters Three and Four could have been reversed to emphasize this progression even more overtly.

<6>The chapter closes with an intriguing look at the influence of Japanese culture – and particularly the code of Bushido – in schoolboy fictions, and in formulations of imperial identity more generally. In Kipling's *Stalky and Co.* M'Turk asks his schoolmates, "Did you ever read a book about Japanese wrestlers?" (2) and proposes using the tactics of jujutsu to outwit their schoolmasters. Deane presents a compelling collection of similar references as evidence of a recognition amongst late-Victorian writers that British imperial masculinity, with its insistence upon physical strength and skill, had much to learn from Japanese culture. With such arguments, Deane has identified an exciting avenue for future research into Anglo-Japanese cultural exchange. There exists already a long-established tradition of scholarship on Japonism in late-nineteenth-century art, as well as in constructions of the aesthete and the decadent of fin-de-siècle culture. One cannot help but feel from reading Deane's book, however, that a detailed study on representations of Japan in New Imperialist writing – and particularly in constructions of imperial masculinity, which were themselves so hostile towards the decadent, dandy figure of the period – would constitute a refreshingly original perspective on late-Victorian gender ideals.

<7>Having established the willingness of New Imperialist discourse to celebrate the masculine traits of the colonial other, and to idolize the amorally competitive spirit of boyhood as a quality to be preserved in the adult imperialist, the final three chapters of the book pursue these qualities into the distant lands and remote timescapes of imperial genre fiction. Deane tackles the "Lost World" novels of Kipling and Conan Doyle, the mummy fictions which enjoyed a surge in popularity after the British occupation of Egypt in 1882, and the science-fiction stories of H. G. Wells and others who project notions of the progress of civilization and evolution forwards through time into a nightmarish future redeemable only by the more savage impulses of the imperial male. Collectively, these chapters emphasize the New Imperialist fascination with the collapsing of temporal distance or, more specifically, the idea of an eternal and even primal standard of masculinity which is consistent throughout all empires past, present, and future. They also draw together an impressively kaleidoscopic range of primary texts so that it is

difficult to imagine any student or researcher reading *Masculinity and the New Imperialism* without accruing a sizeable reading list of previously undiscovered popular fictions for future perusal. Like his chosen texts, Deane's prose is colorful, pacey, and vibrant. As well as being eminently readable, however, the book is also rigorously researched and intellectually stimulating. Its use of popular fiction as a broad lens through which to consider late-Victorian gender ideals has resulted in a more comprehensive understanding of cultural constructions of New Imperialist manliness than has hitherto been available.

Endnotes

(1) Charles Grey Robertson, "A Note on the New Imperialism," *Time* (March 1891): 227-233 (231).[\(↗\)](#)

(2) Rudyard Kipling, *Stalky and Co.* (London: Macmillan, 1899), 125.[\(↗\)](#)