

British Voices of Empire:

Poetry and Imperial Patriotism in the Long Nineteenth Century

Abstract

Notwithstanding the cultural turn in imperial history from the 1990s, scholars of British imperial literary culture in the period from the 1790s to the 1910s have remained largely silent on poetry. Situated at the intersection of literary studies and British imperial history, my dissertation addresses this serious scholarly gap by offering a first-ever in-depth study of the interplay between British poetic texts and imperialism during the so-called long nineteenth century (1789–1914). Combining extensive archival research with careful historical contextualisation and in-depth textual analysis, the latter being guided by the interrelated thematic axes provided by space, time, war and peace, I identify and interpret a number of understudied forms of versified imperial patriotism. Throughout the dissertation, I deploy the cognate concepts of ‘imperial voice’ and ‘echo’ to trace how poetry not only articulates but also reverberates imperial ideologies across time and textual space. These concepts provide a framework for examining how poetic texts speak of and for the Empire, re-sound its authority and reproduce its ideological structures through both original composition and later collection or repetition. Following the opening chapter, which outlines the scope and theoretical-methodological framework of my dissertation, chapters two and three focus on individual poems and collections, while chapter four focusses on the poetry anthology. Despite differences in the typology of poetic texts examined, chapters two through four all pay sustained attention to the empire-related ideological significance of the highly relevant thematic interconnections of space, time, war and peace within the different primary texts under scrutiny.

Through close readings of the various poetic responses to the Jubilee of George III, celebrated in 1809 (chapter two), and the Golden Jubilee of Queen Victoria, fêted in 1887 (chapter three), and through a critical discussion of selected patriotic poetry anthologies published in Britain between the 1880s and the 1910s (chapter four), I highlight the complex and multifaceted yet generally downplayed, if not entirely overlooked, role of poetry in British imperial literary culture, thus complicating previous accounts that have dismissed or narrowly framed the interactions and intersections between British poetic texts and the Empire across the long nineteenth century.