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Ornamentalism and Orientalism:

Virtual Empires and the Politics of Knowledge

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David Cannadine might be surprised to learn that he has written a curiously post-modern book. This is not really as odd as it sounds. Of course, *Ornamentalism* is so readable and easily digestible that it might be mistaken for post-prandial rather than post-modern. And, of course, Cannadine contends that rank and status were more important to the British Empire than race, a category given undue prominence, he believes, by “post-modern” literary scholars. Cannadine aims to correct the excesses of “American” scholars who see the production of derogatory racial stereotypes as constituting a “hegemonic imperial project.” Cannadine confesses that he does not know what an imperial project is, and doubts that one ever existed. (pp. 197–8) Yet, almost in spite of himself, Cannadine argues that the British Empire existed to promote what must surely be called a hegemonic imperial project: to order into a unified hierarchy all the subjects of the British Empire across the globe — imperialism *as* ornamentalism.¹

Ornamentalism surveys the efforts to export and represent this hierarchy through public pageants, the honours system, and elaborate ceremonials. Cannadine asks what the Empire “actually looked like” from the 1850s to the 1950s and replies that “the British” saw the Empire as a vast, interconnected hierarchy with the monarchy at its apex, radiating authority downwards and outwards from the metropolis to the periphery. When George VI surveyed

Westminster Abbey after his coronation, he thought “the whole Empire” was gathered within its walls. “Virtually it was, and visually it was,” agrees Cannadine, “with its whole diverse social hierarchy unified, ranked, ordered, layered, and arranged.” (p. 120). To preempt critics, Cannadine admits that efforts to create a unified global hierarchy outside the walls of Westminster Abbey were never successful. Indeed, his discussion of the limitations of ornamentalism leads to a broader and more subversively post-modern conclusion (though he does not state it in these terms): the failed attempt to create a vast, unified hierarchy created simply a simulacrum of a social order, and imperialism as ornamentalism represented little more than a “virtual empire.”

Cannadine frames his argument with polemical references to Edward Said’s *Orientalism*, suggesting that “there were other ways of seeing the empire than in the oversimplified categories of black and white with which we are so preoccupied. It is time we reoriented orientalism.” (p. 125) Apart from alliterative allusions and rhetorical references, however, Cannadine does not directly engage Said’s arguments in *Orientalism*, which were not about “race,” but rather discourse, representation, and power in the West’s production of the “Orient” as an object of knowledge. Crucially, Said employed an expansive, Foucaultian notion of power, which defined orientalism as “a Western style for dominating, restructuring and having authority over the Orient.” (p. 3) Almost 25 years after it was published, Said’s book remains a bracing and invigorating critique of the politics of knowledge.

Orientalism has been extraordinarily influential in many fields of the humanities and social sciences, especially in the interdisciplinary study of colonialism and its forms of knowledge.² Said was criticized for concentrating on Western representations of the Orient and neglecting the role of the “other” as an agent. Partly in response to such critiques, many subsequent studies have attempted to understand imperialism and colonialism as a back-and-forth process of contact, encounter, and exchange. In *Culture and Imperialism*, Said adopted just such a “contrapuntal” perspective.³ Within British history, Cannadine is also responding to a local version of this broader intellectual trend, and he thus situates *Ornamentalism* as an attempt to put the history of the empire back into the history of Britain and vice versa. That metropolis and periphery should be studied together in the same analytical field has become one of the most widely shared assumptions in the study of the British Empire and British history.

Cannadine’s most persuasive argument is that empire sustained hierarchy in Britain. But the interplay between metropolis and periphery appears to be a British monologue rather than a process of dialogue or exchange. This is because *Orientalism* and *Ornamentalism* seriously diverge in their treatment of power and in their assumptions about the “end” of empire. Cannadine’s laser-like focus on status and hierarchy to the exclusion of other useful categories of historical analysis, and to the neglect of agency emanating from the periphery

suggests a more modernist approach. I want briefly to explore the implications of Cannadine's ornamental empire as a "virtual" empire and the politics of knowledge embedded in Cannadine's analysis. Cannadine may say very little about Said, but *Orientalism's* approach to the politics of knowledge helps to understand the context and consequences of the "virtual empire" of *Ornamentalism*.

Virtual Empires

Could Cannadine's ornamental empire be a "virtual empire"? Cannadine suggests that the British strategy of imperial rule was to export a traditional culture of hierarchy to other parts of the world through the replication of "sameness" among collaborating elites with a fondness for baubles and titles. The coronations and jubilees of British monarchs offered perhaps the crown jewels: "this was no mere ceremonial confection: the spectacular projection of the queen-empress and king-emperor was the essence and heart of the matter." (p. 111) But was it? Did the parades sometimes show that the emperor had no clothes? After recovering these ceremonies from the British point of view as if they mattered to imperial rule, Cannadine concedes that much of the time they did not. His chapter on "Limitations" suggests that the empire was never as hierarchical or homogenized as Britons thought, and only a minority embraced imperial honours, which were widely rejected in the empire by the interwar years. "There was a substantial element of ignorance, self-deception and make-believe in this hierarchical vision of the British Empire." (pp. 136, 144, 147). In an appendix, Cannadine goes further and suggests that "The British Empire was far too ramshackle a thing ever to display such unanimity of action and consistency of purpose." (p. 198).

Cannadine frequently asks what did the empire "actually look like?" (pp. xvii, 3, 121) Like General Bosquet watching the charge of the Light Brigade, it is tempting to say that ornamentalism looked magnificent: "C'est magnifique, mais ce n'est pas l'empire." Surely the empire "looked like" quite a lot of things, including architecture, anthropology, commerce, Christianity, convicts, censuses, diamonds, exhibitions, explorers, famines, fruit, films, financiers, gardens, gold, guns, immigrants, manufacturing, maps, medicine, missionaries, mountaineers, museums, massacres, murder, mutinies, the navy, opium, photography, prisons, railways, rum, schools, science, sex, slavery, sugar, spice, steamships, tea, war, and so on. Cannadine knows this, and readily admits that hierarchy and ornamentalism represent a neglected but only partial vision of the empire.

Yet his own analysis would be much stronger if his perspective embraced a wider "peripheral vision," in the literal and metaphorical senses of the term. Most obviously, geographically: How did people on the colonial periphery react to ornamentalism, and how did British ornamentalism compare to strategies of rule in other European empires? And, most

importantly, analytically: How were similar representational practices in exhibitions, museums, films and so on related to the ceremonies of ornamentalism? Cannadine's emphasis on the period after 1857 excludes not only the Indian Mutiny, which has obvious implications, but also the Great Exhibition of 1851, which presented an alternative vision of Britain and its empire as bringing progress, improvement, and modernization. Did exhibitions at South Kensington or Wembley contradict hierarchical and ornamental durbars, or did they supplement one another as part of a unified "exhibitionary complex"? ⁴ How was ornamentalism related to prominent ways of knowing the empire which represented different societies as existing in hierarchical relationships with one another? Were status hierarchies defined not just by rank, but also by cultural attributes of masculinity and gentility, such that ornamentalism and "gentlemanly capitalism" were two sides of the same coin? ⁵

Despite his claim that ornamentalism was not the one-sided creation of the "British imagination" because a few colonials hankered after honours (p. 134), Cannadine almost invariably locates agency for ornamentalism in the metropolis, the society from which "these powerful imperial impulses and imaginings *originated* and *emanated*." (p. 121, emphasis added). He also underplays resistance to these impulses, whether from within Britain or from without. ⁶ In a passing comment, Cannadine acknowledges that "within an ostensibly obsequious pattern of behavior, opposition to empire was expressed." (p. 143). Yet this insight receives insufficient attention. For the mimicry that Cannadine mentions (e.g. pp. 56, 102) could be deeply ambivalent. Since imitation of the colonizer by colonial subjects was never completely achieved — almost the same but not quite — mimicry of the colonizer could become a form of mockery. ⁷

Resistance receives so little attention because Cannadine defines agency and power as how the British saw themselves without attending to how they were seen by others. This may stem from asking what the empire "looked like," rather than, as Said did, "how did and does *Orientalism* work?" ⁸ Post-orientalist scholarship should ask about agency and power, but also history: how did these images change? ⁹ Said was criticized for underplaying indigenous agency and for portraying orientalism as a monolithic mode of thought from Cromer to Kissinger. Cannadine, too, is more interested in regional variation between the colonies than in change over time. Once Disraeli had set the pattern, *Ornamentalism* is surprisingly static, with continuities so durable that Churchill is said to have presided over a British Empire "still recognizably the same traditional, royal, layered, Burkeian organism" it had been in 1776. (p. 132). To be sure, Cannadine highlights the interwar years as a period of turmoil, but he appears to agree with Virginia Woolf that the substantive cause of the disturbance was the abdication of Edward VIII rather than any extra-European events or influences.

Cannadine offers two interpretations of the end of empire that are both consistent with seeing the ornamental empire as a virtual empire. First, he suggests that the end of empire

signified the rejection of hierarchy, as if hierarchy were uniquely British. It might be more precise to say that the end of empire entailed the rejection of British forms of hierarchy as one dimension of the rejection of British rule — not necessarily the rejection of hierarchy itself, which was often reconstituted in local forms after independence (as Cannadine partly notes). The second, and somewhat contradictory, line of argument is that the end of empire was a reaction against the imperial modernity of technology, education, health, sanitation, and so forth, rather than against imperial conservatism embodied in ornamentalism. In the end, Cannadine sees the British Empire in Whiggish, almost panglossian terms that would have warmed the heart of Macaulay: “improvement was inevitable, reform was unavoidable, modernization was inexorable, and progress was irreversible.” (p. 149).

Politics of Knowledge

The British Empire is Over: this is the epistemological standpoint of *Ornamentalism*, and it is a major fault-line that separates David Cannadine from Edward Said and “his ‘Orientalist’ followers” much more decisively than their supposedly distinctive emphasis on status or “race.” For Cannadine, “it is only now that it is finally dead and gone that we can begin to grasp” the full extent and varied nature of British Empire. (p. 130) The recent *Oxford History of the British Empire* adopts this perspective, attempting to see the empire “whole” and to assess its legacy “at this distance in time.”¹⁰ In contrast, Said’s *Orientalism* and post-colonial scholarship investigate the continuing influence of imperial, colonial, or orientalist assumptions and practices in the contemporary world. Post-colonial scholarship does not presume that colonialism is “finally dead and gone” but instead asks how particular experiences of empire continue to influence the present. The “post-” in post-colonial attempts to clear a space for scholarship written in full awareness of the varied ways in which colonialism has defined contemporary forms of knowledge and subjects of study, even as scholars must rely on analytical categories such as class, race, caste, tribe, rank, and status that were themselves forged in empire.

Said wrote that histories cannot seriously be understood “without their force, or more precisely their configurations of power, also being studied.”¹¹ What are the configurations of power in *Ornamentalism*? Cannadine proposes a symmetrical and mutually reinforcing rise and fall of empire and hierarchy. The export of British domestic social hierarchies to the empire served to reinforce hierarchy at home, and as Britain became less imperial it has also become less hierarchical. This process culminated in the handover of Hong Kong in 1997 and the removal of most hereditary peers from the House of Lords in 1999. While Cannadine notes that hierarchical traces linger in former colonies and in the British Royal Family, changes in Hong Kong and the House of Lords herald the end of ornamentalism. Now that the empire is finally “gone,” the hierarchical structures of ornamentalism — imperial honours, the

monarchy, deference, and the aristocracy's claim to rule by hereditary right — have been irreparably weakened. Perhaps the Conservative Party should be added to the list. The British Empire made Lutyens, among others, feel “very Tory and pre-Tory feudal,” and the zenith of empire “coincided with the heyday of spectacular ceremonies, and with the hegemony of the Conservative Party” (pp. 131, 134). Cannadine implies that the end of the British Empire and consequent decline of hierarchy in Britain may provide the basis for a more egalitarian social order and a period of hegemony for New Labour.

If the argument of *Ornamentalism* has political implications in the narrow sense, the organization of the book also highlights the changing politics of knowledge about empire. Cannadine takes inspiration from a pre-Saidian imperial historiography. In an autobiographical appendix on his imperial childhood in the 1950s and 1960s, Cannadine recalls reading geography and history textbooks by Harry Johnson and others and later studying scholarly works by Nicholas Mansergh, Jack Gallagher, Eric Stokes and Ronald Robinson. “Some of this must have rubbed off on me. For their histories of the empire were still written from the viewpoint of the British metropolis.” (p. 195) Cannadine follows this earlier historiography by concentrating on the men who ruled the empire, and the “conventional wisdom of the imperial mind of the metropolis.” (p. 10) In addition, the organization of *Ornamentalism* resembles an early twentieth century imperial geography textbook: Cannadine offers a tour of the imperial horizon with individual chapters on the dominions, India, colonies, mandates, and so on, with several later chapters internally following the same structure. In the worldview it describes, the structure of its argument, and its intended British audience (“our nation's past,” p. xviii), *Ornamentalism* resembles the earlier books about the British Empire from a British point of view from the 1950s and 1960s. *The Oxford History of the British Empire (OHBE)* also draws intellectual inspiration from this earlier historiography.¹²

Returning to this earlier paradigm, *Ornamentalism* and the OHBE are reactions against the “empire strikes back” scholarship that followed Said's *Orientalism* in the 1970s. This represents not merely a swing of the historiographical pendulum. As John Gillis has noted, much scholarship since the 1960s engaged in a search for “usable pasts capable of serving the heterogeneity of new groups that had become active on the national and international stage: racial and sexual minorities, women, youth, and dozens of new nations and ethnic groups aspiring to sovereign status.”¹³ The pasts thus generated and used — which decentered subjects like empire and gave prominence to categories like race — posed challenges to earlier forms of knowledge about nation and empire. Cannadine's riposte that “race” was not important, which is, quite frankly, ornamental to his argument about hierarchy, attempts to confront this recent historiography without directly engaging it in debate. For it would be difficult to find any scholar, anywhere, who did not agree that class, status, race, gender and so on were each a part of the empire, and that “*they were only a part.*” (p. 126, emphasis in

original) The significance of Cannadine's impassioned plea for status at the expense of race lies not in some deeper meaning but in its very exteriority, like ornamentalism itself. After all, status was only "part" of an imperial project to order hierarchically a virtual empire that is already over, and improvement was inevitable. The implication is that not as much is at stake in the study of empire as post-Saidian, post-modern, or post-colonial scholars have supposed.

Though addressed primarily to a British audience, Cannadine sees *Ornamentalism* as a transatlantic book. America appears as the first country to reject hierarchy, and as the egalitarian model later followed by dominions and colonies alike. (pp. 15, 39, 132, 170). But America also haunts the book as the land preoccupied with race, and Cannadine's experience teaching on both sides of the Atlantic created "contradictions not yet fully reconciled." This accurately conveys the way in which Cannadine's exclusive emphasis on status hierarchies oscillates ambivalently between a kind of strategic essentialism (only a part of empire) and a position of flexible superiority (hierarchies are less racist than egalitarian societies). Considered in a transatlantic context, the wider debate over discourse, difference and race in the British Empire may seem to resemble the American "culture wars" more than the German *historikerstreit*. Situated in a broader context, however, one that embraces India, Africa, and elsewhere, the debate over the British Empire includes coming to terms with Victorian "holocausts" as much as Victorian hierarchies.¹⁴ In Britain, the widely but not universally shared assumption, exemplified by Cannadine, is that the empire is "over," and that its past can now be mastered. In the US or India or other parts of the world, the widely but not universally shared assumption, exemplified by Said, is that empire is still with us and its past remains unmasterable because the past is not even past.

This brings us to a question posed by this forum: how do we understand or write about the imperial/colonial past? Cannadine frequently repeats P.D. Morgan's comment that bringing metropole and colony together may reveal "an entire interactive system, one vast interconnected world." Earlier in the same passage in Cannadine's frontispiece, Morgan identifies the real challenge and motivation for bringing together the local and general: "Only then will we glimpse whole worlds ... that have not been seen before." How to glimpse new worlds and create new forms of knowledge remains the central challenge for anyone attempting to understand the imperial/colonial past. Yet to create new forms of knowledge requires using the old ones, and this creates inevitable tensions that test the limits of historical writing.¹⁵

Attending to the politics of knowledge should make a difference. By coincidence, I am writing this essay while teaching in Thailand, where the Chulalongkorn University library contains four copies of Said's *Orientalism* (and one copy of Cannadine's *Rise and Fall of the British Aristocracy*). I was delighted to find copies of *Orientalism* at Chulalongkorn with marginalia in both Thai and English scripts, a pattern that must be repeated in libraries, used-

bookstores and translations around the world. Said wrote his book for scholars of literature and textuality, scholars of the “Orient,” general readers, and readers in the so-called third world, and he was remarkably successful in reaching all of them. Will Cannadine’s *Ornamentalism* be read in Thailand? Probably not, but perhaps it should be — for reasons that confirm the importance of Cannadine’s central argument. Thailand was never colonized during the colonial period and it remains a constitutional monarchy with a revered King as symbol of the nation, continuing a venerable monarchical and hierarchical tradition. To what extent was Thailand — or China or other states — able to resist European colonization *because* local structures of hierarchy and indigenous forms of “ornamentalism” were so strong and well developed? Perhaps examples from the periphery of *Ornamentalism*-in-reverse might provide the title for David Cannadine’s next book on hierarchy and empire in two words: *Kowtow Matters*. ¹⁶

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Notes

1. David Cannadine, *Ornamentalism: How the British Saw their Empire* (New York, 2001) and Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* (New York, 1978). Page references to Cannadine’s work are in the text.

2. Bernard Cohn, *Colonialism and Its Forms of Knowledge* (Princeton, 1996).

3. Edward Said, *Culture and Imperialism* (New York, 1993).

4. Tony Bennett, *The Birth of the Museum: History, Theory, Politics* (London, 1995).

5. P.J. Cain and A.G. Hopkins, *British Imperialism* 2 vols., (London, 1993).

6. See, for example, Peter H. Hansen, “Confetti of Empire: the Conquest of Everest in Nepal, India, Britain and New Zealand,” *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 42 (2000): 307–332.

7. Homi Bhaba, *The Location of Culture* (London, 1994).

8. Said, *Orientalism*, p. 44.

9. Peter H. Hansen, “Debate: Tenzing’s Two Wrist-Watches: the Conquest of Everest and Late Imperial Culture in Britain, 1921–1953: Comment,” *Past and Present* 157 (Nov. 1997): 159–177.

10. Wm. Roger Louis, ed., *The Oxford History of the British Empire*, vol. 4, (Oxford, 1999), p. vii.

11. Said, *Orientalism*, p. 5.

12. Dane Kennedy, “The Boundaries of Oxford’s Empire,” *International History Review* 23 (2001): 604–22.

13. John R. Gillis, ed., *Commemorations: the Politics of National Identity* (Princeton, 1994), p. 19.

14. Mike Davis, *Late Victorian Holocausts: El Niño Famines and the Making of the Third World* (London, 2001).

15. See Peter H. Hansen, "Why is There No Subaltern Studies for Tibet," *Tibet Journal* (Spring 2002), forthcoming, and Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Colonial Difference* (Princeton, 2000).

16. See James Hevia, *Cherishing Men from Afar: Qing Guest Ritual and the McCartney Embassy of 1793* (Durham, NC, 1995).

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