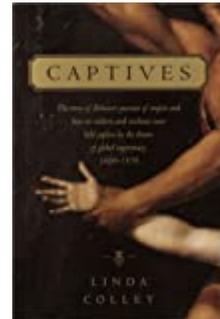




Linda Colley. *Captives: The story of Britain's pursuit of empire and how its soldiers and civilians were held captive by the dream of global supremacy.* New York: Pantheon Books, 2002. xvii + 438 pp. \$27.50 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-375-42152-5.



Kathleen Wilson. *Island Race: Englishness, Empire and Gender in the Eighteenth Century.* London: Routledge, 2003. 282 pp. \$130.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-415-15895-4; \$37.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-415-15896-1.

Reviewed by Eliga H. Gould (Department of History, University of New Hampshire)

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The State of the Field

Twenty-five years ago, the British Empire was at best a minor presence in British historical scholarship. Although the field of imperial studies was showing signs of renewed vigor, British history invariably meant the history of metropolitan Britain, and “Britain” all too often served as a synonym for the union’s English core. Today, the situation is practically reversed. Imperial themes pervade scholarship on the nineteenth and twentieth centuries; India, Ireland, and America feature prominently in early modern narratives; and the British nation of England, Scotland, and Wales has regained its proper character as a “multiple monarchy” or empire. A graduate student preparing for comprehensive exams is likely to know as much about soil depletion in Virginia as crop rotation in Suffolk, as much about interracial sexuality in Bengal as worker radicalism in the Midlands, and a great deal more than earlier generations would have thought possible about marronage in Jamaica, Protestant missions in Nigeria, and educational reform in the High-

lands.

Although the reasons for this tectonic shift are as numerous as the British Empire once was vast, much of the credit goes to a talented cohort of British historians who began reconceptualizing the relationship between nation and empire during the 1980s. Foremost among that group are Linda Colley and Kathleen Wilson, whose path-breaking scholarship demonstrated the centrality of Britain’s eighteenth-century expansion overseas to the formation of the political nation at home.[1] In the two important books under review here, Colley and Wilson build on the insights of their earlier work, in particular moving toward a deeper engagement with the history of colonized lands and peoples beyond Britain’s shores. For that reason alone, both are welcome additions to British history and the history of the British Empire, as well as an indication of where scholarship in the field currently stands.

Colley's book is about the thousands of ordinary Britons—men and women, soldiers and civilians—taken captive by indigenous rulers and peoples in North Africa, India, and North America between the early seventeenth century and the middle decades of the nineteenth. Part of the book's appeal lies in the drama of the narratives that many of its subjects wrote upon regaining their freedom. In relating these stories, Colley uses her considerable literary talents to the fullest, blending masterful prose with judiciously chosen maps and illustrations. Her main interest, however, is what captivity has to tell us about the larger trajectory of Britain's imperial expansion. As Colley notes in the introduction, the history of the British Empire reveals a striking "disparity between Britain's massive imperial pretensions on the one hand and its modest domestic size and resources on the other" (pp. 6-7). Despite the empire's astonishing extent—covering perhaps a fifth of the world's population at its Victorian zenith—Britain itself was a relatively "small" country, even by the standards of contemporary Europe (p. 10). Because the army and navy were never able to offer more than token protection for Britain's overseas territories, the main burden for maintaining these pretensions fell on the ordinary men and women who flocked to the colonies or took to the high seas, often at considerable danger to themselves and their families. In North Africa alone, Colley reckons, as many as 20,000 Britons endured captivity between 1600 and 1750. Although Colley is careful not to claim too much for such people as "victims" of Britain's expansion, she suggests that the British themselves were, in important respects, captives of their own quest for empire.

For readers of Colley's earlier work on national identity in Britain proper, perhaps the most striking part of her analysis is the vulnerability and fragile national identity of Britons in the colonies. Throughout the book, a leitmotif is that Britain's expansion "always involved dependence on non-whites and non-Christians, and not merely the experience of ruling them" (p. 71). Another theme is the frequency with which Britons taken captive adapted to—and in some cases adopted—the mores of their captors. For groups like the sailors condemned to work as galley slaves on Barbary corsairs, such cultural transgressions were the result of coercion and nothing else. But there is plenty of evidence to suggest that Britons also voluntarily refashioned themselves, changing religion (usually to Islam), taking non-European husbands and wives, and entering the service of local potentates whose resources frequently outstripped those of the British Empire. As Colley writes of British en-

listed men in India during the first half of the nineteenth century, their aristocratic countrymen in the East India Company's officer corps were the object of far more resentment and hatred than the subcontinent's "natives" (p. 343). Although never welcome, captivity for such people could be a chance for escaping the constraints of their own society, whether social, sexual, or religious.

Although Kathleen Wilson's book is more metropolitan in focus—the title foregrounds "Englishness" as a principal concern and much, though by no means all, of the material involves the response to empire at home—she too emphasizes the instability of national identities in imperial contexts. For Wilson, the key to understanding the metropolitan consequences of Britain's expansion lies in the English conception of themselves as an "island race," a people at once "solitary and singular" and connected through "oceanic networks" to the globe's most distant regions (p. 5). This paradox had two linked consequences. On one hand, the isolationist strand in England's island consciousness encouraged a biological, "quasi-essentialist" sense of nation that endowed English men and women with racially as well as culturally unique characteristics (p. 8). Although elements could be acquired (or lost), Englishness was ultimately innate, tied ineluctably to skin color, lineage, and blood. On the other hand, the often painful awareness of connectedness to other places (especially extra-European places) forced the English to acknowledge the mutability of race, notably along the fault lines of gender and sexuality. For England to survive in a world where the temptation to be "unconventional" could be great indeed, men had to avoid the snares of effeminacy, and women needed to preserve their "capacity for domestic virtue" as wives and mothers (p. 21).

Because this quest for purity was as much cultural as biological, Wilson organizes the book around a series of critical investigations, each of which examines a different aspect of the "performative" interplay between Englishness, empire, and gender. Echoing the subject of her first book, chapter 1 discusses the relationship between empire and civic consciousness in English provincial towns. Another chapter looks at the impact of war on English women, whether as visitors to militia encampments outside London or as prisoners of war during the American Revolution. Two chapters explore the voyages of Capt. James Cook, and one uses the life of the English courtesan and colonist Teresia Constantia Phillips to limn the possibilities that empire offered women for sexual transgression and self-fashioning. Taken together, these essays suggest—as Wilson writes on the book's final page—

that “national identity ... provided neither a stable and continuous frame of reference nor a full and final recognition.” Instead, the nation emerges as a construct in constant flux, at best a series of “points on a historical continuum of being and becoming for individuals and groups in many different social and geographical locations” (p. 204).

Despite significant differences between their books—Colley’s draws on a discrete body of captivity narratives but covers a quarter millennium of imperial history; Wilson’s focuses on one century while mobilizing arguments from cultural theory, imperial history and postcolonial studies—both authors agree on one point. In profound and unexpected ways, Britain’s expansion was destabilizing for the British themselves, for the nation with which they identified, and, it would appear, for the history now being written about that nation. In this, their conclusions second themes currently at the forefront of imperial history. If, as a distinguished panel of North American historians suggested several years ago, one reason for the imperial turn in British history is to reassert the subject’s relevance as a teaching field beyond Britain’s borders, this is a deeply ironic outcome.[2] Occasional

doubts notwithstanding, historians of Britain and its empire still seem to need the nation.[3] But the nation and empire as we find them today are a far cry from what they once were. As Colley and Wilson so ably remind us, that is surely all for the best.

Notes

[1]. Linda Colley, *Britons: Forging the Nation, 1707-1837* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1992); Kathleen Wilson, *The Sense of the People: Politics, Culture, and Imperialism in England, 1715-1785* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1995).

[2]. Peter Stansky, Nicoletta F. Gullace, Cynthia Herup, Dane Kennedy, Brian Levack, Jeffrey Reznick, and Martin Wiener, “NACBS Report on the State and Future of British Studies in North America,” *British Studies Intelligencer* 10, no. 1 (Spring 2000): pp. 11-27; available at <http://www.nacbs.org/NACBS/report.html>.

[3]. Antoinette Burton, “Who Needs the Nation? Interrogating ‘British’ History” *Journal of Historical Sociology* 10 (1997): 227-249.

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